THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 1989
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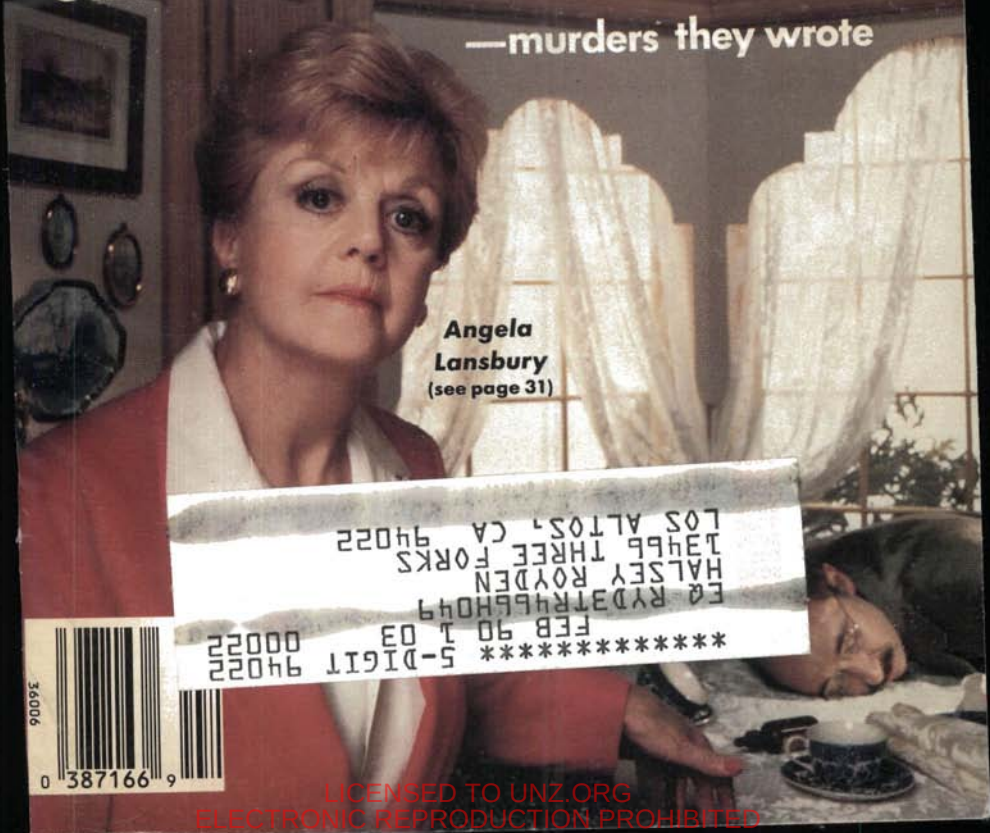
—murders they wrote



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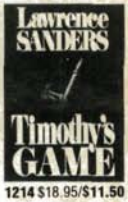

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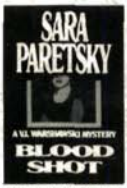

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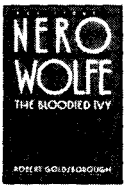

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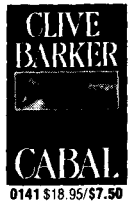

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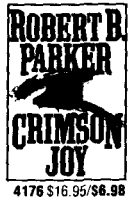

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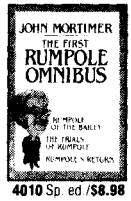

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Contents

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN®

The Theft of the Doctor's Chopsticks	Edward D. Hoch	**3**
Cleveland in My Dreams	Lawrence Block	**21**
The Face of Violence	Robert Barnard	**32**
Burning Bridges	James Powell	**38**
The Vigil Table	Miriam Grace Monfredo	**52**
Story from a Dark Street	Peter Turnbull	**56**
The Jury Box	Jon L. Breen	**70**
Routine Assignment	Terry Mullins	**74**
The Here and Now	Judy Lopatin	**83**
The Substitute	John C. Boland	**99**
The Curious Incident	James Sallis	**108**
The Barclay Boys	Raleigh Bond	**110**
The Sabbath Flame	Ronald Levitsky	**124**
The Jackal and the Tiger	Michael Gilbert	**133**

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

When Nick agreed to the assignment for his usual fee of $25,000, Gloria asked what their old friend Tony Wilde wanted stolen.

"Chopsticks," Nick told her.

"When?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"Then we can fly home on Wednesday."

"Maybe. What's the hurry? I thought you liked Chicago."

"I do," she said. "But I spend too much money here . . ."

THE THEFT OF THE DOCTOR'S CHOPSTICKS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Tony Wilde, Chicago restaurateur, had been a friend of Nick Velvet's since the closing days of the Korean War. He was a stocky man with steel-grey hair, just a year or two older than Nick, and still imagined himself something of a charmer with women of all ages.

"How's the lovely Gloria?" he asked as he rose from the table to shake hands with Nick. "Don't tell me you left her back East?"

"No, she's doing some shopping," Nick said. "Chicago's one of her favorite cities—I could never fly out here without her." He seated himself at the special table Tony liked to use for private conversations. The Wilde Spot hadn't changed much since his last visit four years earlier, and he wondered if Tony's menu was still the same. "Business as good as ever?"

"It could be better this month, but you know how April is. Everyone stays home to do their taxes."

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Nick lowered his voice a bit. "I hope you're not still selling drugs."

Tony shook his head. "I stopped that three years ago. It wasn't worth the risk."

"I'm happy to hear it. Frankly, when I got your call, Gloria thought you might be in jail."

Tony laughed. "If they ever locked me up, half the big shots in this town wouldn't know where to go for dinner."

A waiter appeared with an oversized menu and handed it to Nick. "What's good tonight?" Nick asked.

"Try the veal. You won't be disappointed."

Over cocktails, while they awaited the first course, Nick asked, "What can I do for you, Tony?"

"The last time you were out here, you rescued me from a kidnaper. You also managed to steal a library book for me."

"I remember."

"That woman, the White Queen—did you ever see her again?"

"Once or twice," Nick admitted.

"I'm married again since you saw me last—a lovely young woman. Jill's far too young and too good for me, but if she doesn't object I certainly don't."

"Congratulations," Nick said. "When do we get to meet her?"

"How about lunch tomorrow? Will Gloria be able to join us?"

"I'm sure she'll want to. But let's get whatever business we have cleared up first. What do you need?"

"I want you to steal a doctor's chopsticks."

"Anyone I know?" Nick asked.

"Dr. Henri Giroux. He's French, though he's lived in this country for the past forty years. He's past sixty and talks of retiring soon."

"If these chopsticks have any value—"

"None whatsoever. They're plain wooden chopsticks with Dr. Giroux's name imprinted in cheap gold lettering—*Henri* on one and *Giroux* on the other—the way some Chinese restaurants do with their names. He carries them in a cloth pouch when he's planning to eat Chinese."

"How often is that?"

"Every week or two. His favorite Chinese restaurant is the Palm Dragon, on South Michigan near the Art Institute. The chopsticks would be easiest for you to steal at the restaurant. I have no idea where he keeps them at home."

"Tell me about him. What does he look like?"

"Early sixties, bushy white hair, wears glasses for reading. He

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still has a slight French accent. Here—I can show you a picture of him. He attended my wedding reception with his companion, a woman named Cecile Constance."

The picture showed Tony and his bride, a lovely blonde, with the white-haired Dr. Giroux and a handsome woman in her fifties. "Can I keep this for now?" Nick asked.

"All right."

"Giroux is unmarried?"

"Divorced several years ago. Cecile was a friend of his brother Paul until Paul died recently. Henri and Paul came here to Chicago together after the war."

Nick nodded. The assignment seemed simple enough. "I imagine you already know the next time Dr. Giroux will be dining at the Palm Dragon."

Tony smiled. "Tomorrow evening."

Back at his hotel, Nick found Gloria collapsed on the bed. "I never walked so much in my life! I'm so worn out, I just ordered room service."

He bent to give her a light kiss. "Tony's married."

"He is?"

"Her name is Jill and she's very young." He showed Gloria the photo. "We can meet her at lunch tomorrow if you're agreeable."

"Of course I am."

Nick slipped out of his jacket and tie. "You'll be happy to hear he's out of the drug business."

"That's good. But what does he want stolen?" She sat up on the bed and swung her feet to the floor. He'd lived with Gloria for more than twenty years and was still excited by her legs.

"Chopsticks."

"When?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"Then we can fly home on Wednesday."

"Maybe. What's the hurry? I thought you liked Chicago."

"I do, but I spend too much money here."

The waiter arrived with room service and Nick ordered a drink while Gloria attacked her dinner. The maid arrived to turn down the bed and check the towels. It was an expensive hotel and everything was handled to perfection.

The flight out had left them an hour ahead of local time. Though they often stayed up till one o'clock at home, they turned out the

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light just after midnight. "Thanks for bringing me along," Gloria told him softly.

"I do whenever I can," he assured her.

As she drifted off to sleep, her innate caution caused her to ask, "Nicky, did you put the chain on the door?"

"That and the bolt, too. Go to sleep."

He awoke as the first light of dawn filtered around the edges of the heavy draperies. With daylight savings time it was still only around six-thirty, so he rolled over for another hour's sleep. When he finally arose, it was nearly eight o'clock and Gloria was beginning to stir. He went to the bathroom and prepared for his morning shower, then remembered that the hotel had promised a *Wall Street Journal* outside the door each weekday morning. Taking off the chain and bolt, he opened the door. It was on the floor and he scooped it up.

"What time is it?" Gloria inquired sleepily.

"Just after eight. I'm going to shave and shower."

He left the newspaper on a chair, stepped into the bathroom, closed the door, and picked up his shaving kit from the marble countertop. Half hidden by the kit was something long and slender, wrapped loosely in a paper towel. Nick frowned and unwrapped it.

There was a pair of wooden chopsticks inside the paper. Near the narrow end, printed in gold lettering, one of them said HENRI. The other said GIROUX.

Jill Wilde was every bit as delightful as Nick had expected. Tall and slim, with frosted blonde hair she wore in a lion's mane, she walked into the room on her husband's arm and turned almost every head in the place. "Nick Velvet," she said. "I've heard so much about you from Tony."

"I hope it was all good. This is Gloria."

"Gloria!" Jill took both of Gloria's hands like a long-lost sister. "Tony never stops talking about you."

They sat at the same table Nick and Tony had occupied the previous evening. Tony seemed pleased to be showing off his new wife, and if she looked more like his daughter that didn't seem to bother him a bit. Jill insisted on knowing what Gloria had been doing since their arrival and suggested a few new shops she might not want to miss.

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This time Nick failed to finish the food on his plate. "You're fattening me up, Tony. I'm full."

Jill was still chatting with Gloria when Nick suggested the men excuse themselves.

He followed Tony into the familiar office off the restaurant entrance. Once inside, he reached into his inner pocket. "Are these what you wanted me to steal?"

Tony examined the chopsticks. "Yes. But how did you get them so quickly?"

"I think I did it in my sleep."

"It's amazing. But I don't question your techniques—I have your money here in the safe."

"Examine them closely, will you, Tony? I want to be certain they're the ones you want."

Tony turned the chopsticks over in his hands. "These are the ones, all right. You've earned your money."

Nick nodded.

"All the same," he said, "I think I'll pay a visit to the Palm Dragon this evening."

Later, back in their hotel room, Gloria remarked, "Jill will keep Tony young for a while. She's full of ideas. She told me she wants them to travel as soon as he hires someone he can trust to manage the restaurant."

"She seems nice," Nick agreed absently.

"Did you get your money?"

"For the chopsticks? Oh, yes. Tony's always dependable. It's just that I have a feeling I've cheated him somehow."

"He paid you to deliver the chopsticks and you delivered them. Why worry about how you did it?"

"Our room was locked all night and I'm not in the habit of sleepwalking."

"Maybe someone left them by the door with our newspaper and you brought them in without realizing it."

"That's impossible." Nick walked about the room restlessly. "I won't be satisfied until I go to the Palm Dragon tonight and see if Dr. Giroux is there."

"So you can steal his chopsticks a second time?"

"Gloria, I haven't even stolen them once." He tried to calm down. "Let's forget about the chopsticks, Gloria. Wouldn't you like a nice Chinese dinner, anyway . . . ?"

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At eight that night, they strolled down South Michigan Avenue to the Palm Dragon Restaurant. It was a distinctly modern place with more palms than dragons, and as the hostess seated them Nick asked, "Has Dr. Giroux's party arrived yet?"

"Yes, sir. The table against the wall by the entrance."

When they were settled behind their menus, Gloria said, "Tony's not going to pay you twice."

Nick was studying the slim man who was donning his reading glasses to study the wine list with an air of authority. The woman across the table from him had long white hair that reached to her shoulders, startling in someone of her age. That would be the doctor's friend, Cecile Constance, looking very much as she did in the photograph Nick had borrowed from Tony.

As Dr. Giroux pocketed his reading glasses and handed the wine list back to the steward, Nick excused himself and headed for the men's room, a route that carried him past the doctor's table. The Palm Dragon's own chopsticks lay at the side of each plate along with optional silverware, but by Henri Giroux's plate there was a second pair of chopsticks of slightly darker wood. Even at a quick glance, Nick could see the gold lettering.

He kept on walking, past the men's room to the front door. They'd passed a few homeless men on the way in, looking for handouts, and Nick spotted one of them now, waiting in a doorway down the block. He approached the man and took a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. "How'd you like to earn this and a couple more just like it?"

The man's eyes lit up. "What do I have to do?"

"Wait five minutes, then walk into the Palm Dragon and collapse on the floor as if you're having a heart attack. Think of it as an acting audition. If you're convincing enough, I'll slip you two more of these." He pushed the twenty into the man's eager hand.

Back at their table inside the restaurant, he ignored Gloria's disapproving gaze. "Shall we order?" he said.

The waiter was just answering a question of Gloria's about the salad when they saw a commotion in the foyer. Nick saw the man collapse on the floor and heard someone tell the hostess, "Get a doctor!" She hesitated only an instant, then ran over to Dr. Giroux's table. "A man came in and collapsed! I think he may be having a heart attack!"

Giroux put down his napkin and followed her to the foyer. Nick waited to see if Cecile Constance would go with him. If she didn't,

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he had an alternate plan. But after a moment she followed along to see what was happening and Nick was on his feet.

He strolled past Giroux's table once more and palmed the chopsticks, sliding them easily up his sleeve. He doubted if even Gloria could have seen it. Then he made his way to the foyer just as Dr. Giroux stood and said, "He seems all right, but we can't take chances. We'd better call an ambulance."

Nick bent down and slipped two folded twenty-dollar bills into the fallen man's hand.

Back in their hotel room, Nick studied the stolen chopsticks. "They're defective," he told Gloria. "Look here, the last letter of each name is missing. Instead of *Henri* and *Giroux* they read *Henr* and *Girou*. Whoever imprinted them made a mistake the first time. Giroux must have kept these and brought them along tonight because he couldn't find the correct ones."

"So the chopsticks you delivered to Tony were the right ones, after all," Gloria said.

"So it seems. I just wonder where in hell they came from."

The bedside telephone rang at that moment and Nick answered, wondering who would be calling them at this hour. He expected to hear Tony's voice, but it was a woman. "Mr. Velvet? You don't know me, but my name is Cecile Constance. I must speak with you tonight. Could you come down to the lobby?"

"Ah—what is it about?" he asked innocently.

"Chopsticks."

He took a deep breath. "I'll be in the cocktail lounge in five minutes."

When he'd hung up, Gloria asked, "Who was that?"

Nick smiled. "That was Cecile Constance, the woman who was dining with Dr. Giroux this evening. She wants to talk to me about chopsticks."

"Do you think you should phone Tony?"

"Probably. But maybe I'll hear what she has to say first. Perhaps she'll tell me why these chopsticks are so valuable."

He took the elevator down to the lobby and found Cecile Constance seated alone at one of the cocktail tables in the lounge. She was wearing the same purple dress she'd worn earlier, its neckline dipping in the back as if to make room for her long hair. He came up behind her and circled the table into her range of vision. "Miss Constance? I'm Nick Velvet."

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She looked up. "I know who you are. I saw you at the Palm Dragon earlier. I knew it had to be you who stole the chopsticks."

"What chopsticks are those?" Nick asked, taking the chair opposite.

"The ones belonging to Dr. Giroux. They have his name on them." She took out a cigarette and carefully fitted it into a holder. Up close, she seemed younger, perhaps still in her early fifties, with smooth, delicate skin other women must have envied. "Sometimes I think I'll end up being the last smoker in America," she said. She smiled at the thought and then turned serious again. "Henri—Dr. Giroux—is a wonderful man and an old friend. I try to look after his interests. Someone pointed you out to me at the Wilde Spot a few years ago—Nick Velvet, the famous thief who steals only the valueless. I knew it had to be you who stole the chopsticks, and I called the major hotels until I located you."

"I have nothing to hide," Nick said. "Or I wouldn't be so easy to find."

"Who paid you to steal the chopsticks?"

"I haven't admitted stealing anything. Nor am I in the habit of revealing my clients." Nick paused to order drinks from a hovering waiter, then returned to the conversation. "What makes these particular chopsticks so valuable?"

"They were a gift to Henri from his older brother Paul on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday two years ago. They have no value at all except a sentimental one. You see, Paul died a few months ago. He'd known he was in ill health for years, and his will stated that Henri had already received his legacy in the form of those chopsticks. Of course, they have no value in themselves."

"The brothers were estranged?"

"Not at all. They were the best of friends. In fact, when the original set of chopsticks proved defective, Paul quickly ordered a replacement set."

"How can chopsticks be defective?" Nick asked innocently.

"He'd had Henri's name imprinted on them, and the printer dropped off the final letters of each name. Henri kept them anyway, as spares. Sentimental spares, I suppose." She ejected the butt of her cigarette in the ashtray as their drinks arrived and inserted a fresh one in its place.

"And which set was stolen at the Palm Dragon?"

"As a matter of fact, it was the defective one. Henri couldn't locate his regular set."

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"Did his brother leave a large estate?"

"Mainly an art collection of uncertain worth. It consists of seventy-five modern paintings, many by little-known Chicago artists. The lawyers and appraisers are trying to determine if any of them have value."

"They could have."

Cecile Constance looked doubtful. "A preliminary estimate fixed the total of all seventy-five at fifteen thousand dollars, tops."

"Who gets the collection?"

"Henri and I each have our choice of one painting. The rest are to be sold and the money donated to something called the Starving Artists' Fund, administered by Paul's attorney and Tony Wilde."

"What is it you want of me?" Nick asked.

"Somehow those chopsticks are a clue to the value of the paintings. I want them back."

"I wish I could help you."

"I think you can, Mr. Velvet. I'll top whatever you've been offered for the chopsticks."

Nick threw back his drink. "Sorry," he said and stood up. "It's been nice talking with you, Miss Constance."

"I hope you don't regret your decision," she said as he walked away.

Back in the room, Nick settled down to think. Cecile Constance wanted the chopsticks back and was prepared to pay big money for them. Tony Wilde had already paid big money to have them stolen. Everyone acted as if they were valuable, but no one seemed to know exactly what their value was.

Gloria was by the window, turning over the defective pair in her hands. "Maybe they're like keys, Nicky. You insert the smaller end into some sort of keyhole and a door opens."

"Then any pair of chopsticks would do. What makes these so special?"

"And which ones are special? You turned over the ones you found here to Tony and he seems happy with them, but Cecile Constance offered you money for the defective ones."

"I think the truth is that no one knows." Nick went to the phone and called Tony Wilde. When Tony's voice came on the line, Nick told him about the offer from Cecile Constance.

"Why did you steal the second pair?" Tony asked.

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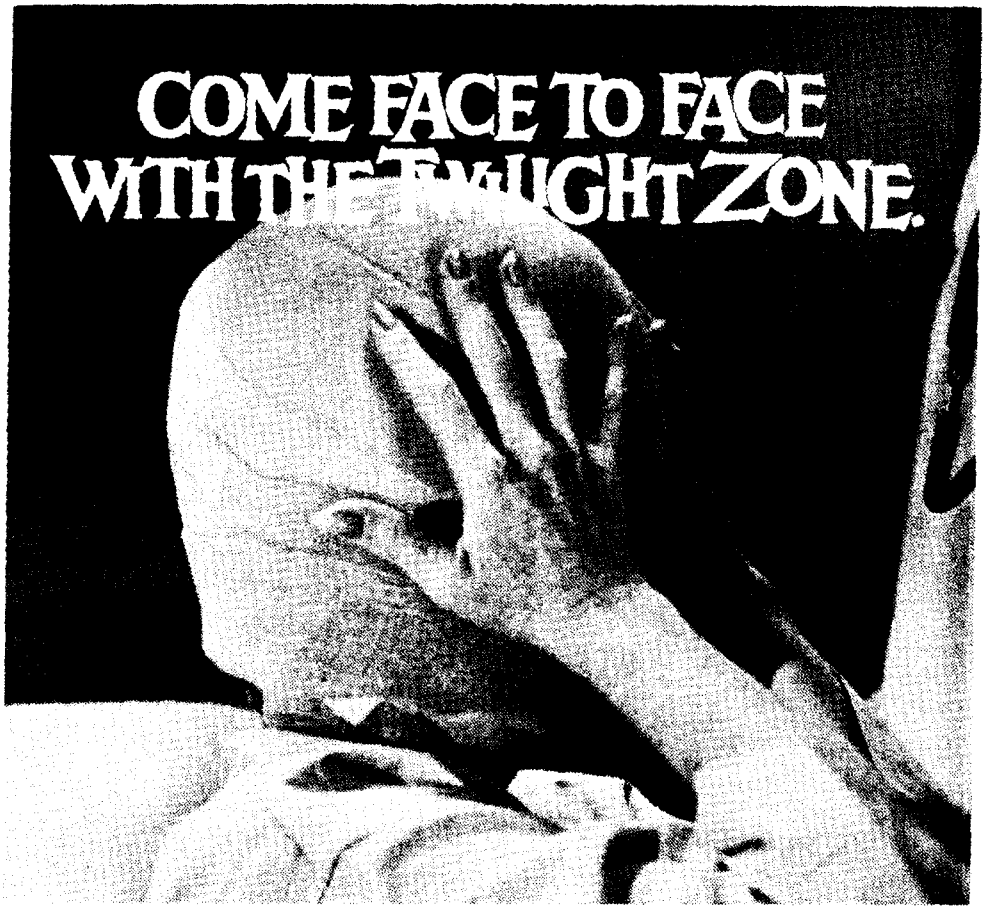

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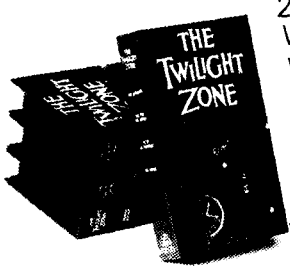

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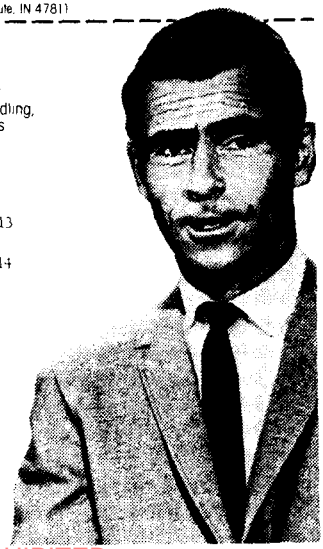

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"Just a hunch. Tony, what's your tie-in with the Giroux estate, and with those paintings?"

"Why do you ask that? Another hunch?"

"Paul Giroux's will stated that his brother and Miss Constance each had the choice of one painting among the seventy-five in his collection. The will also stated that the chopsticks were Paul's legacy to his brother. When is this choice of paintings supposed to be made?"

Tony hesitated. "The day after tomorrow," he said finally. "After that, the remainder goes to the Starving Artists' Fund."

"Do you want this second pair of chopsticks?"

"Sure. Bring them over in the morning."

Nick hung up and pondered his next move. He looked up the number of the hotel's housekeeper on the list next to the phone, called it, and requested more towels. Gloria stared at him and said, "We've got plenty of towels. Why do we need more?"

"We don't need more," he agreed. "But we need the person who delivers them. If you or I didn't place those chopsticks in the bathroom during the night, there's only one way they could have gotten there. Remember the maid who turned down the bed and checked the towels?"

"You think the same one is on duty tonight?"

"I'm going to find out."

She arrived a few minutes later with towels and washcloths—a large Hispanic woman in her forties. Nick remembered her from the previous night. She deposited the towels and asked, "Can I get you anything else?"

Nick held up a twenty-dollar bill. "Information. You left something here last evening, didn't you?"

"I—"

"It couldn't have been anyone but you," Nick said. "This twenty is yours if you tell me who paid you to do it."

"I don't mean to hurt you," she insisted. "It is only those Chinese things—chopsticks. The woman say it is a joke."

"The woman?"

"Yes. Long hair." She motioned toward the back of her head.

"Gloria, bring me that photo of Henri Giroux and Cecile Constance."

When Gloria brought the picture from Tony's wedding reception, he held it out to the maid. It didn't make any sense that Cecile Constance would secretly give him the chopsticks and then try to

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buy them back, but this was a strange business all around. "Is that the woman who paid you?"

The maid's face brightened. "Yes, she is the one!" She pointed her finger at the photograph.

"The woman with the long white hair?"

"No, no, no! This one!"

She was pointing at the bride—Tony's wife, Jill.

When Nick arrived at the Wilde Spot the following morning, he found Tony and Jill together in the office, going over the previous night's accounts. "Pretty good for a Tuesday," Tony decided, closing the ledger. "Now, you've got those chopsticks for me?"

Nick turned them over, glancing at Jill. Her mane of blonde hair tumbled down her back much as it had in the photograph. It would be difficult to mistake anyone else for her. "Here they are, but you can see they're defective. They were the first ones Paul Giroux gave his brother."

Tony nodded. "Maybe these *are* the ones I want." Then he did an odd thing. He took an iron washer from the top drawer of his desk and touched it with the tip of each chopstick. So far as Nick could see, nothing happened. "One of those paintings is valuable," Tony explained, "and somehow these chopsticks can point out which one it is. I'm beginning to suspect one of the frames could be magnetized, and it might attract a chopstick filled with iron filings."

Jill shook her head. "I think the whole idea is foolish. You told me you were going straight, Tony."

"There's nothing shady about this," Tony told her. "It's all open and above board."

"That's why you paid Nick twenty-five thousand to steal those chopsticks?"

"Look," Tony said with a sigh. "Paul's will said the chopsticks were his legacy to his brother, and it also gave Henri and Cecile a choice of one painting each. It's obvious the chopsticks carry a clue as to which painting Henri should choose. There's probably something shady involved or Paul would simply have left him the valuable painting outright." He turned to Nick. "Are you flying back today?"

"We might stay until tomorrow. I understand that's when the collection is being disposed of."

"Sure, come along."

"You'll be there?"

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Tony grinned. "The Giroux attorney and I are co-administrators of a small charity called the Starving Artists' Fund. After Henri and Cecile choose their paintings, the remainder passes into my hands."

"For the charity," Jill scoffed. "After you learned of the will, you and that attorney got yourselves named co-administrators. Aren't you hoping to grab the valuable painting for yourself and leave the junk for the charity?"

Tony merely smiled and avoided the brewing argument by going off on some business. When they were alone, Nick said to Jill, "Thanks for the first set of chopsticks. It saved me the trouble."

"I don't know what you're talking—"

"Cut the act, Jill. The chambermaid identified your photo."

She sat at her husband's desk, tapping a pencil nervously. "I did it for Tony. I didn't want him hiring you to steal anything. I couldn't present him with Henri's chopsticks directly, so I arranged to have them turn up in your room. I had no idea there was a second pair."

"How'd you get the chopsticks?"

She stopped tapping. "That's the part that's hard to explain."

"Try me."

"Well, Cecile wasn't always Henri's companion. In fact, she was quite friendly with Paul while he was alive."

"I suppose that doesn't surprise me. After all, she got left a painting in the will, same as Henri. But where do you come in?"

"I'd—I'd been to Henri's place a few times before Tony and I were married. Before Paul died. I knew where he kept the chopsticks. I simply went over and took them."

"Just like that?"

She blushed prettily. "I still had a key."

Nick shook his head. "The man was old enough to be your father."

"So are you, Nick."

Nick didn't ask her what she meant by that. He was afraid she might tell him.

The Giroux lawyer's name was Waldo Smith, and his office was located in one of the modern office buildings just down the street from Chicago's Water Tower. Tony had given Nick his name with some reluctance, agreeing only when Nick told him, "I want to keep you out of jail, buddy."

Waldo Smith adjusted his spectacles and peered at Nick. "You're here about the Giroux estate? Paul Giroux?"

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"That's correct. I understand his legacy consists mainly of some seventy-five paintings. I wonder if I could examine them."

"What is your interest in the paintings?"

"I'm a friend of Tony Wilde. I may be dealing with the Starving Artists' Fund to appraise the works."

"They've already *had* a preliminary appraisal," Waldo Smith told him. "You can look at the paintings if you wish, but they're quite routine. Nothing of any great value."

"Tony said you have them here."

The attorney nodded. "They're not the sort of thing one keeps in a bank vault. We have them lined up in our conference room. Come this way."

Nick looked over the paintings—mainly modern, abstract works of supreme ugliness—and accepted the list Smith handed him.

1. *Shattered Moonrise,* oil by Fayer Perkins $500
2. *Call to Arms,* watercolor by John Klay $350
3. *Cabbage at Play,* watercolor by Jennifer Salomon $250
4. *Chicago 5,* oil by Matthew Saint $400
5. *Highways,* pencil drawing by Anthony Clark $100

There were seventy-five in all. None of the artists were familiar to Nick.

"Is the order of the listing important?" he asked.

"Not at all. Apparently Paul Giroux simply listed them as they were acquired. The prices are values placed on them by the preliminary appraisal. They figured an average worth of two hundred a painting. That Perkins oil at five hundred is the most valuable of the lot."

Nick stared at the list, baffled. None of the titles referred to chopsticks or China in any way. None of them referred to a piano, Nick thought, remembering the simple piano melody. "Let me ask you something," he said to the lawyer. "Is there any possibility that Paul Giroux was murdered?"

"None whatsoever. He had liver and stomach cancer. He knew he was dying when he drew up this will. His family and friends knew he had only months to live."

"What will be the procedure tomorrow morning?"

"His brother Henri will choose one of the paintings. Then Miss Constance will choose one and the other seventy-three will be turned over to Tony Wilde for the Starving Artists' Fund."

"Does such a fund exist?" Nick asked.

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"Mr. Wilde assures me it does. I thought you said you were appraising the paintings for them."

"I'm working for Mr. Wilde." Nick picked up the list of paintings. "I'll see you in the morning, Mr. Smith."

Tony and Jill Wilde arrived early at the lawyer's office the following day, just after Nick got there. Henri Giroux and Cecile Constance made their appearance somewhat later, perhaps aware that nothing could begin without them.

Cecile made a point of coming over to speak with Nick. "You have quite a nerve showing your face here, Mr. Velvet. We intend to take legal action if our rightful inheritance is denied us."

"Time to begin," Waldo Smith announced. "Dr. Giroux, have you decided on your painting?"

The white-haired physician eyed the work with open distaste, making a circuit of the conference room to look at each one again before he spoke. "I suppose it will be the Perkins oil, since it's listed as the most valuable, though I can hardly imagine myself paying five hundred dollars for it."

"Very good," the lawyer said, setting the chosen painting aside. "Miss Constance—your choice, please."

She had obviously thought about it in advance. "Fifty-seven," she announced. "That's my age. If Paul was trying to leave me something, that might be the number he chose."

"You weren't fifty-seven when he died," Henri pointed out.

"Nevertheless, that's my choice."

Painting number fifty-seven proved to be a watercolor titled *Sears Tower*, by a woman named Ginny Stout. It was valued at two hundred dollars. "At least I can see what it's supposed to be," Cecile commented, picking up the painting.

Somehow everyone seemed disappointed. Dr. Giroux and Cecile departed with their chosen inheritances and Tony stood staring at the rest of them. "All right," he said finally. "Let's get to work."

For the next hour he and Jill went over each of the paintings and frames, using the two pairs of chopsticks as if they were magic wands.

But there were no keyholes, there was no magnetism.

"The chopsticks are worthless," Tony decided.

"I told you that from the beginning," his wife said.

"Perhaps the wording of the legacy meant something else entirely, unconnected with the paintings."

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Waldo Smith came into the conference room with a document to be signed. "This simply states that you've taken possession of the paintings and that any proceeds from their sale is to go to the Starving Artists' Fund."

"Fine." Tony took the paper from him.

Jill was turning the two sets of chopsticks over in her hands. "Why would Henri have kept this pair that had his name wrong? For that matter, how could Paul have presented them to his brother without realizing the final letters were missing from the name?"

Nick lifted his head from studying the paintings. "Maybe that was the whole point—to call attention to the two missing letters."

"I and X? They don't mean anything."

"Not in English, but doctors use Latin phrases for prescriptions. And they certainly know Roman numerals when they see them."

"IX!" Tony shouted. "Painting number nine!"

They all crowded around it—an abstract of lines and shadows titled *Glowworm,* valued at $275. Nick picked it up and examined the back. "If the front of the painting isn't valuable, maybe—"

Jill gasped as the canvas backing came away in Nick's hands and they were staring at a very old oil painting of a woman in a black-lace mantilla. "Another painting hidden behind the abstract!" Tony exclaimed. "I should have known it was something like that."

Waldo Smith bent to peer at it. "Look at the signature! It's a Goya, probably painted around two hundred years ago—"

"And worth a great deal more than fifteen thousand dollars," Tony remarked with a grin.

He was reaching for the painting when Jill's hand stayed him. "It's Henri Giroux's legacy from his brother. It belongs to him, Tony. Either that, or it belongs to the Starving Artists."

"To hell with the Starving Artists! This one is mine!"

"There should be one more," Nick told them. "Remember Paul Giroux left two legacies. Cecile received a painting, too."

"But he didn't give her any chopsticks," Jill said.

"He didn't have to. As they say in the old romances, he'd given himself."

"What?" Tony Wilde looked baffled.

"If Henri Giroux was IX, what was Paul Giroux by the same reckoning—of the last letter of his given name?"

"LX!" Jill exclaimed. "Sixty!"

"Correct," Nick said, going down the row to choose the painting in question. "Cecile was only three paintings away from her treas-

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ure." He tugged at the backing of the small still life and they saw a drawing of curving black lines come into view. "It looks like an early Picasso," the lawyer said in a tone of whispered awe. "If it's authentic, it could be worth even more than the Goya."

Tony slapped Nick on the back. "It's worth every penny of your fee, that's for sure!"

"You can't *keep* these," Jill insisted. "They must belong to someone!"

"They certainly do," the lawyer said, reaching for a book on his shelves. "I'm something of an art collector myself, and I think I recognize— Yes, here it is. In fact, *both* paintings are described here. They're part of a collection the Nazis seized when they invaded France. Somehow Paul Giroux got his hands on them after the war and smuggled them into this country."

"You mean they can't be sold?" Tony asked, astounded.

"Not a chance. They're too well known. No one would touch them. Paul Giroux's legacy is too valuable to be valuable. The best you can hope for is your picture in the newspapers when you announce their discovery."

Flying home that evening, Nick told Gloria all about it.

"Don't you feel guilty about keeping your fee from Tony?" she asked.

"Not a bit. He hired me to steal a pair of chopsticks and I actually delivered two pair. I solved the puzzle of their meaning and uncovered two valuable paintings that have been missing for decades. Most important of all, I helped keep our old friend Tony from falling back into a life of crime."

"What did he pay you for that?" Gloria unfastened her safety belt.

"Not a thing," Nick admitted. "But I got a kiss from Jill."

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a *NEW* short story by

LAWRENCE BLOCK

"I barely get to sleep when the alarm rings and it's time to get up," Hackett complained. "I never get a decent night's sleep. I'm exhausted all the time, and my work's falling off and I'm losing weight, and sometimes I'm just hallucinating at my desk, and I can't stand it, I just can't stand *it."*

"Yes," Loebner said. "Well, I see our hour is up . . ."

CLEVELAND IN MY DREAMS

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

"So," Loebner said. "You continue to have the dream."

"Every night."

"And it is always without variation yet? Perhaps you will tell me the dream again."

"Oh, God," said Hackett. "It's the same dream, all right? I get a phone call, I have to go to Cleveland, I drive there, I drive back. End of dream. What's the point of going through it every time we have a session? Unless you just can't remember the dream from one week to the next."

"That is interesting," Loebner said. "Why do you suppose I would forget your dream?"

Hackett groaned. You couldn't beat the bastards. If you landed a telling shot, they simply asked you what you meant by it. It was probably the first thing they taught them in shrink school, and possibly the only thing.

"Of course I remember your dream," Loebner went on smoothly. "But what is important is not my recollection of it but what it means to you, and if you recount it once more, in the fullest detail, perhaps you will find something new in it."

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What was to be found in it? It was the ultimate boring dream, and it had been boring months ago when he dreamed it the first time. Nightly repetition had done nothing to enliven it. Still, it might give him the illusion that he was getting something out of the session. If he just sprawled on the couch for what was left of his fifty minutes, he ran the risk of falling asleep.

Perchance to dream.

"It's always the same dream," he said, "and it always starts the same way. I'm in bed and the phone rings. I answer it. A voice tells me I have to go to Cleveland right away."

"You recognize this voice?"

"I recognize it from other dreams. It's always the same voice. But it's not the voice of anyone I know, if that's what you mean."

"Interesting," Loebner said.

To you perhaps, thought Hackett. "I get up," he said. "I throw on some clothes. I don't bother to shave, I'm in too much of a hurry. It's very urgent that I go to Cleveland right away. I go down to the garage and unlock my car, and there's a briefcase on the front passenger seat. I have to deliver it to somebody in Cleveland.

"I get in the car and start driving. I take I-71 all the way. That's the best route, but even so it's just about two hundred fifty miles door to door. I push it a little and there's no traffic to speak of at that hour, but it's still close to four hours to get there."

"The voice on the phone has given you an address?"

"No, I just somehow know where I'm supposed to take the briefcase. Hell, I *ought* to know, I've been there every night for months. Maybe the first time I was given an address, it's hard to remember, but by now I know the route and I know the destination. I park in the driveway, I ring the bell, the door opens, a woman accepts the briefcase and thanks me—"

"A woman takes the briefcase from you?" Loebner said.

"Yes."

"What does this woman look like?"

"That's sort of vague. She just reaches out and takes the briefcase and thanks me. I'm not positive it's the same woman each time."

"But it is always a woman?"

"Yes."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know. Maybe her husband's out, maybe he works nights."

"She is married, this woman?"

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"I don't *know*," said Hackett. "I don't know anything about her. She opens the door, she takes the briefcase, she thanks me, and I get back in my car."

"You never enter the house? She does not offer you a cup of coffee?"

"I'm in too much of a hurry," Hackett said. "I have to get home. I get in the car, I back out of the driveway, and I'm gone. It's another two hundred fifty miles to get home, and I'm dog-tired. I've already been driving four hours, but I push it, and I get home and go to bed."

"And then?"

"And then I barely get to sleep when the alarm rings and it's time to get up. I never get a decent night's sleep. I'm exhausted all the time, and my work's falling off and I'm losing weight, and sometimes I'm just about hallucinating at my desk, and I can't stand it, I just can't *stand* it."

"Yes," Loebner said. "Well, I see our hour is up."

"Now let us talk about this briefcase," Loebner said at their next meeting. "Have you ever tried to open it?"

"It's locked."

"Ah. And you do not have the key?"

"It has one of those three-number combination locks."

"And you do not know the combination?"

"Of course not. Anyway, I'm not supposed to open the briefcase. I'm just supposed to deliver it."

"What do you suppose is in the briefcase?"

"I don't know."

"But what do you suppose *might* be in it?"

"Beats me."

"State secrets, perhaps? Drugs? Cash?"

"For all I know it's dirty laundry," Hackett said. "I just have to deliver it to Cleveland."

"You always follow the same route?" Loebner said at their next session.

"Naturally," Hackett said. "There's really only one way to get to Cleveland. You take I-71 all the way."

"You are never tempted to vary the route?"

"I did once," Hackett remembered.

"Oh?"

"I took I-75 to Dayton, I-70 east to Columbus, and then I picked up I-71 and rode it the rest of the way. I wanted to do something

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different, but it was the same boring ride on the same boring kind of road, and what did I accomplish? It's thirty-five miles longer that way, so all I really did was add half an hour to the trip, and my head barely hit the pillow before it was time to get up for work."

"I see."

"So that was the end of that experiment," Hackett said. "Believe me, it's simpler if I just stick with I-71. I could drive that highway in my sleep."

Loebner was dead.

The call, from the psychiatrist's receptionist, shocked Hackett. For months he'd been seeing Loebner once a week, recounting his dream, waiting for some breakthrough that would relieve him of it. While he had just about given up anticipating that breakthrough, neither had he anticipated that Loebner would take himself abruptly out of the game.

He had to call back to ask how Loebner had died. "Oh, it was a heart attack," the woman told him. "He just passed away in his sleep. He went to sleep and never woke up."

Later, Hackett found himself entertaining a fantasy. Loebner, sleeping the big sleep, would take over the chore of dreaming Hackett's dream. The little psychiatrist could rise every night to convey the dreaded briefcase to Cleveland while Hackett slept dreamlessly.

It was such a seductive notion that he went to bed expecting it to happen. No sooner had he dozed off, though, than he was in the dream again, with the phone ringing and the voice at the other end telling him what he had to do.

"I wasn't going to continue with another psychiatrist," Hackett explained, "because I don't really think I was getting anywhere with Dr. Loebner. But I'm not getting anywhere on my own, either. Every night I dream this goddamned dream and it's ruining my health. I'm here because I don't know what else to do."

"Figures," said the new psychiatrist, whose name was Krull. "That's the only reason anybody goes to a shrink."

"I suppose you want to hear the dream."

"Not particularly," said Krull.

"You don't?"

"In my experience," Krull said, "there's nothing duller than somebody else's dream. But it's probably a good place to get started, so let's hear it."

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While Hackett recounted the dream, sitting upright in a chair instead of lying on a couch, Krull fidgeted. This new shrink was a man about Hackett's age, and he was dressed casually in khakis and a polo shirt with a reptile on the pocket. He was cleanshaven and had a crewcut. Loebner had looked the way a psychiatrist was supposed to look.

"Well, what do you want to do now?" Hackett asked when he'd finished. "Should I try to figure out what the dream means or do you want to suggest what the dream might mean or what?"

"Who cares?"

Hackett stared at him.

"Really," Krull said, "do you honestly give a damn what your dream means?"

"Well, I—"

"I mean," said Krull, "what's the problem here? The problem's not that you're in love with your raincoat, the problem's not that they potty-trained you too early, the problem's not that you're repressing your secret desire to watch *My Little Margie* reruns. The problem is you're not getting any rest. Right?"

"Well, yes," Hackett said. "Right."

"You have this ditsy dream every night, huh?"

"Every night. Unless I take a sleeping pill, which I've done half a dozen times, but that's even worse in the long run. I don't really *feel* rested—I have a sort of hangover all day from the pill, and I find drugs a little worrisome, anyway."

"Mmmm," Krull said, clasping his hands behind his head and leaning back in his chair. "Let's see now. Is the dream scary? Filled with terror?"

"No."

"Painful? Harrowing?"

"No."

"So the only problem is exhaustion," Krull said.

"Yes."

"Exhaustion that's perfectly natural, because a man who drives five hundred miles every night when he's supposed to be resting is going to be beat to hell the next day. Does that pretty much say it?"

"Yes."

"Sure it does. You can't drive five hundred miles every night and feel good. But—" he leaned forward "—I'll bet you could drive half that distance, couldn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

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"What I mean," said Krull, "is there's a simple way to solve your problem." He scribbled on a memo pad, tore off the top sheet, handed it to Hackett. "My home phone number," he said. "When the guy calls and tells you to go to Cleveland, what I want you to do is call me."

"Wait a minute," Hackett said. "I'm asleep while this is happening. How the hell can I call you?"

"In the *dream* you call me. I'll come over to your place, I'll get in the car with you, and we'll drive to Cleveland together. After you deliver the briefcase, you can just curl up in the back seat and I'll drive back. You ought to be able to get four hours sleep on the way home, or close to it."

Hackett straightened up in his chair. "Let me see if I understand this," he said. "I get the call, and I turn around and call you, and the two of us drive to Cleveland together. I drive there, and you drive back, and I get to nap on the drive home."

"Right."

"You think that would work?"

"Why not?"

"It sounds crazy," Hackett said, "but I'll try it."

The following morning he called Krull. "I don't know how to thank you," he said.

"It worked?"

"Like a charm. I got the call, I called you, you came over, and off we went to Cleveland together. I drove there, you drove back, I got a solid three and a half hours in the back seat, and I feel like a new man. It's the craziest thing I ever heard of, but it worked."

"I thought it would," Krull said. "Just keep doing it every time you have the dream. Call me the end of the week and let me know if it's still working."

At the week's end, Hackett made the phone call. "It works better than ever," he said. "It's gotten so I'm not dreading that phone call, either, because I know we'll have a good time on the road. The drive to Cleveland is a pleasure now that I've got you in the car to talk to, and the nap I get on the way home makes all the difference in the world. I can't thank you enough."

"That's terrific," Krull told him. "I wish all my patients were as easily satisfied."

And that was that. Every night Hackett had the dream, and every night he drove to Cleveland and let the psychiatrist take the wheel

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on the way home. They talked about all sorts of things on the way to Cleveland—girls, baseball, Kant's categorical imperative, and how to know when it was time to discard a disposable razor. Sometimes they talked about Hackett's personal life, and he felt he was getting a lot of insight from their conversations. He wondered if he ought to send Krull a check for services rendered and asked Krull the following night in the dream. The dream-Krull told him not to worry about it: "After all," he said, "you're paying for the gas."

Hackett's health improved. He was able to concentrate better, and the improvement showed in his work. His love life improved as well, after having virtually ceased to exist. He felt reborn, and he was beginning to love his life.

Then he ran into Feverell.

"My God," he said. "Mike Feverell."

"Hello, George."

"How've you been, Mike? Lord, it's been years, hasn't it? You look—"

"I look like hell," Feverell said. "Don't I?"

"I wasn't going to say that."

"You weren't? I don't know why not, because it's the truth. I look terrible and I know it."

"How's your health, Mike?"

"My health? That's what's ridiculous. My health is fine, perfectly fine. I don't know how much longer I can go on before I just plain drop dead, but in the meantime my health is a hundred percent."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's too stupid to talk about."

"Oh?"

"It's this recurring dream," Feverell said. "I have the same dream every goddamned night, and it's driving me nuts."

The room seemed to fill up with light. Hackett took his friend's arm. "Let's get a couple of beers," he said, "and you can tell me all about your dream."

"It's stupid," Feverell said. "It's an adolescent sex fantasy. I'm almost ashamed to talk about it, but the thing is I can't seem to do anything about it."

"Tell me."

"Well, it's the same every night," Feverell said. "I go to sleep and the doorbell rings. I get up, put on a robe, answer the door, and

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there are three beautiful women there. They want to come in, and they want to have a party."

"A party?"

"What they want," said Feverell, "is for me to make love to them."

"And?"

"And I do."

"It sounds," said Hackett, "like a wonderful dream. It sounds like a dream people would pay money to have."

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?"

"What's the problem?"

"The problem," said Feverell, "is that it's too much. I make love to all three of them and I'm exhausted, drained, an empty shell, and no sooner do I drift off to sleep than the alarm clock's ringing and it's time to get up. I'm too old for three women in one night, and these aren't hasty encounters. It takes the whole night to satisfy them all, and I've got no strength left for the rest of my life."

"Interesting," said Hackett, in a manner not altogether unlike the late Dr. Loebner's. "Tell me, are they always the same women?"

Feverell shook his head. "If they were," he said, "it'd be a cinch, because I wouldn't keep getting turned on. But every night it's three brand-new ladies, and the only common denominator is that they're all gorgeous. Tall ones, short ones, light ones, dark ones. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. Even a bald one the other night."

"That must have been interesting."

"It was damned interesting," Feverell said, "but who needs it? Too much is still too much. I can't resist them, I can't turn them down, but I'll tell you, I shudder when the doorbell rings." He sighed. "I suppose it relates to being divorced a little over a year and some kind of performance anxiety, something like that. Or do you suppose there's a deeper cause?"

"Who cares?"

Feverell stared at him.

"Really," said Hackett. "What's the difference why you're having the dream? The *dream* is the problem, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so. But—"

"As a matter of fact," Hackett went on, "the dream isn't the problem either. The problem is that there are too many women in it."

"Well—"

"If there were just one woman," Hackett said, "you'd do just fine, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose so—but there's always three, and no matter how much

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I want to I can't seem to tell two of them to go away. I don't want to hurt their feelings, see, and it'd be impossible to choose among them anyway—"

"Suppose you only had to make love to one of them," Hackett said. "Could you handle that?"

"Sure, but—"

"And then you could get plenty of sleep after she left."

"I guess so, but—"

"And you'd be rested in the morning. In fact, after a dream like that you'd probably feel like a million dollars, wouldn't you?"

"What are you getting at, George?"

"Simple," said Hackett. "Simplest thing in the world."

He got out a business card and scribbled on the back. "My home phone number," he said, thrusting the card at Feverell. "Go ahead, take it."

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Memorize it," Hackett said, "and when the doorbell rings tonight, call me."

"What do you mean, call you? I'm supposed to get up out of a sound sleep and call you? And then what happens? Is it like AA or something—you come over and we have coffee and you talk me out of dreaming?"

Hackett shook his head. "You don't get up," he said. "In the *dream* you call me. You call me, and then you go open the door and let the girls in."

"What's the point of that?"

"The point is that I've got a friend, a psychiatrist as it happens, a very nice clean-cut type of guy. You'll call me, and I'll call him, and the two of us'll come over to your place."

"You're going to schlep some shrink to my house in the middle of the night?"

"This is in the dream," Hackett told him. "We'll come over, and you'll make love to one of the girls, whichever one you choose, and I'll take one, and my friend'll take one. And after you're done with your girl you can go to sleep, and you'll be perfectly well rested in the morning. And we can do this every night you have the dream. All you have to do is call me and we'll show up and help you out."

Feverell stared at him. "If only it would work."

"It will."

"There was a Chinese girl the other night who was just plain out of this world," Feverell said. "But I couldn't really relax and enjoy

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her, because the Jamaican and the Norwegian girls were in the other room and, well—"

Hackett clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Call me," he said. "Your troubles are over."

The following morning, on his way to work, Hackett gave himself up to a feeling of supreme well being. He had repaid Krull's kindness to him in the best way possible, by passing on the favor to another. At his desk that morning, he waited for the phone to ring with a report from Feverell.

But Feverell didn't call. Not that morning, not the next morning, not all week. And something kept Hackett from calling Feverell.

Until finally he ran into him on the street during the noon hour—and Feverell looked *terrible!* Bags under his eyes, deeper than ever. Sallow skin, trembling hands. "Mike!" he said. "Mike, are you all right?"

"Do I look all right?"

"No, you don't," Hackett said honestly. "You look awful."

"Well, I *feel* awful," Feverell said savagely. "And I don't feel a whole lot better for being told how terrible I look, but thanks all the same."

"Mike, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong? You know damned well what's wrong. It's this dream I've been having. I told you the whole story. Or did it slip your mind?"

Hackett sighed. "You're still having the dream?"

"Of course I'm still having the dream."

"Mike," Hackett said, "when the doorbell rings, before you do anything else, you were going to call me, remember?"

"Of course I remember."

"So?"

"So I've called you. Every night I call you, for all the good it does."

"You do?"

"Of course I do, every goddamned night."

"And then I come over? And I bring my friend?"

"Oh, right," said Feverell. "Your famous friend, the clean-cut psychiatrist. Whom I've yet to meet, because he doesn't come over and neither do you. Every night I call you, and every night you hang up on me."

"I hang up on you?" Hackett stared. "Why would I do a thing like that?"

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"I don't know," said Feverell. "I don't have the slightest idea. But every night I call you and you don't even let me get a word in edgewise. 'I'm sorry,' you say, 'but I can't talk to you now, I'm on my way to Cleveland.' Cleveland yet! And you hang up on me!"

ON OUR COVER

The versatile Angela Brigid Lansbury was born in London on October 16, 1925. Her father died when she was nine and her mother, actress Moyna MacGill, brought Angela and her twin brothers, Bruce and Edgar (now theatrical producers), to America at the beginning of World War II. In September 1940, Angela enrolled at the Feagin School of Drama in New York City. A fellow student worked up an arrangement of Noel Coward's "I Went to a Marvelous Party" with Angela imitating Beatrice Lillie's style and soon she was booked into a Montreal nightclub.

By the time the engagement was ended, her mother had moved to Los Angeles and Angela followed. There she tested for the role of the cockney maid in M-G-M's classic film version of Patrick Hamilton's *Gaslight*, which turned out to be her motion-picture debut at eighteen, for which she received her first of three Oscar nominations. Most of the roles she was given disappointed her. "I always wanted to be Jean Arthur," she has said.

She made her Broadway debut with Bert Lahr in Georges Feydeau's *Hotel Paradiso* in 1957 and was then cast as the floozy mother in Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1960). She gave two of her most powerful screen performances in 1962—in James Leo Herlihy's *All Fall Down* and Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*. She has won four Tony Awards for best leading actress in a musical (for *Mame, Dear World,* the revival of *Gypsy*, and *Sweeney Todd*) and three Emmy nominations—for *Little Gloria, Happy At Last, Sweeney Todd,* and *Murder, She Wrote*, now in its fifth and last season on network (CBS) television. Her portrayal of Jessica Fletcher in the latter earned her a special Raven from the Mystery Writers of America. She has been married since 1949 to agent Peter Shaw—they have a son Anthony and a daughter Diedre.

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

ROBERT BARNARD

Robert Barnard's fiction enjoys great popularity whether it is light or dark. Last year, his "Breakfast Television" (light) won a scroll from the Mystery Writers of America and his "The Woman in the Wardrobe" (dark) won both the EQMM Readers Award and the Macavity Award from Mystery Readers International.

There was a shout and then a thump. He had begun. Mrs. Caulfield had known he would. She leaned against the draining board of her little council house, flushed, almost weeping. Another blow, a shout, a child screaming. She almost sank to her knees. That a man who had the blessing of children, the incomparable blessing, could do that . . .

THE FACE OF VIOLENCE

by ROBERT BARNARD

That day, the noise began at breakfast. Mrs. Caulfield could hardly believe her ears. The kettle was on, and she was cutting a piece of bread for toast—she had never had the heart for a proper breakfast since her husband died—when it began. Usually it was evening, at the children's bedtime—or, worse, later, when he got back from the pub. Then it was hard to bear—meaning long, sleepless nights—but beginning so early in the day was somehow still harder to bear. She leaned forward over the breadboard, sweating.

It began with shouting, as usual. Probably he'd been on the drink last night and was taking it out on them now. People had told her that he didn't drink much before the mother died. That was when things had been more hopeful, when they'd had a home of their own, before they'd had to move to the council semi on the outskirts of the village. Mrs. Caulfield shook her head when people told her that.

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It was *now* he shouldn't drink, now when the children needed him. The Farley children were becoming known in the village as neglected, or worse.

The shouting had become a bellow. It penetrated the thin walls into Mrs. Caulfield's kitchen. Then silence. They were scared, poor mites. Of course they made a racket sometimes. There were four of them—it wasn't natural for them to be like mice around their own home, just because that brute had a hangover. She saw him in her mind's eye now: a *big* man—brutal. She could see it in his face, the sensual lips. A brute.

The silence didn't last long. Childish noises began again: a giggle, a voice raised in protest, the beginnings of a dispute. Mrs. Caulfield took her toast from the grill, but it lay on the plate unbuttered. Please God he didn't start. Not now. Not this early in the day. Not to hit them.

There was a shout and then a thump. He had begun. She'd known he would. She leaned against the draining board of her little council house, flushed, almost weeping. Another blow, a shout, a child screaming. She almost sank to her knees. That a man who had the blessing of children, the incomparable blessing, could do *that*. Another shout, a thump. Then silence. A door banged. The children were off to school.

Mrs. Caulfield crept into the dining room, to go to her window to see them go off. Poor little things—poor, grubby little things. They were going quietly, not talking to each other. Simon was snuffling. Simon had a *mark*—on his forehead. As she watched, Margaret, the eldest, licked a dirty handkerchief and dabbed at the scar.

She's afraid the teacher will ask about it, Mrs. Caulfield thought. Please God she does ask! But what would Simon say if she did? Probably say he fell on the way to school and hit it on the curb. Children will put up with so much that they know, so terrified are they of what they don't know.

Since that first bellow, she had felt stirring in her something that wasn't pity, but anger. She ought to go to the police, she knew. But police in her village meant Bob Marshall, a heavy, sarcastic man all the children hated. He would probably take the father's side. "A bit o' discipline never harmed kids, not that I know of," she could hear him saying.

She went back to the kitchen, almost without thinking feeling her toast. It was cold. She took the bread-knife and cut another slice.

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If only she dared *talk* to the father, threaten him with the police, threaten him with the children's headmaster even.

As if in a dream, she opened the back door. All was still in the next house. The kitchen door was open—probably that was why she had heard so clearly. She went down to her back gate. Still no sound from next door. Probably in a hungover stupor, the brute. In an access of determination, she went through her gate and pushed open the rickety one leading to the Farley's back garden. As she went down the path, past the cabbage patch and the rabbit hutch, she realized she was still holding the bread-knife. She felt she ought to take it back and start again, but she knew she would never again have the nerve. Suddenly she was standing at the kitchen door. Her mind photographed the scene for the rest of her life: the greaseproof packet of Hovis cut-loaf, the plastic margarine container, the packet of Chocowheat cereal, the teapot, and the half empty pint of milk. And the man, slumped on the kitchen table.

Something in her mind said: a stupor. The drunken brute. It would be so easy— She took a step forward, raised the knife, and, putting all her desperation and hatred into it, she brought it down. It was as the knife was about to enter the broad back that she realized the man was sobbing.

The next steps were not hard. They, too, were done as if in a dream. She wrenched the knife from the dead man's back and composedly walked back to her kitchen. She washed and washed at the knife until she thought it was clean, but then, for safety's sake, she went up to her attic and stowed it in a trunk of old clothes. She blessed now the fact that she had kept her telephone, little as she could afford it on her widow's pension. She would have to ring the police. Impossible to contemplate the children coming home and finding him.

"I expect I'm being silly," she told Bob Marshall, "but I can't get it out of my mind. It must have been ten minutes ago I heard this cry from next door—like a cry of pain. Of course I ought to go and see, but he's such a *rough* man, and I wondered—"

Then it was a matter of waiting and watching. It was natural to peep from behind her curtains. Surely anyone would do that? First it was Bob Marshall, then quite soon more policemen. Within the hour, there was anything up to a dozen men with all manner of odd-looking equipment, and plainclothesmen who were obviously several cuts above Bob.

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Just after midday, Bob and the man in charge came to talk to her.

"I was a little bit afraid of him," she confessed. "He was such a big man and often—the worse for drink."

"Went to pieces after the wife died," contributed Bob Marshall. "Childbirth it was. He'd worshipped the ground she walked on. Started drinking a bit. Nothing dramatic—just a drop too much beer. He was devoted to those kiddies."

Mrs. Caulfield bit back a response—suppressed, in fact, all reaction. The violence must not be mentioned, the kiddies kept out of it. Otherwise they might think—

"Did he have any people who came regularly to the house?" asked the Detective-Inspector from Colchester. "Associates?"

"I wouldn't know. I never saw anyone. He'd only lived here six months or so, and I don't pry."

"He never said anything? About enemies, or people who bore a grudge against him?"

"Oh, we only ever passed the time of day. Hardly that. Of course I often talked to the kiddies when they were playing in the garden. —What about the kiddies?"

The Inspector assured her, "I've sent a policewoman to tell them. We'll have to find out if there are any relations."

"They could come here till you find somewhere for them," said Mrs. Caulfield. "Of course it's not ideal, being so close."

"No, it's not ideal. Still, the body will be gone by teatime and most of the men will be finished by tomorrow. We'll keep it in mind."

Later that night, when Mrs. Caulfield went out to put stuff in her rubbish bin, Bob Marshall called to her.

"They're staying at the headmaster's overnight. We're not having much luck with relatives. There's a grandfather on the mother's side, but he's seventy and doesn't feel he can take the children. There's a granny on the father's side, but she's in a home. Will Farley had a sister in Australia. We're contacting her, but I'm not hopeful. She's two children of her own. Four's just too many, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's too many," agreed Mrs. Caulfield sadly.

If only she'd been granted that too many.

"So if the offer holds—" Bob said. "Just till we find somewhere permanent."

They came next day. They were very quiet, but that was to be expected. They watched with wide eyes from the window the po-

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licemen going in and out next door. Margaret marshaled the others, clearly feeling the burden of being the eldest. They ate little. Mrs. Caulfield wished they could get the funeral over, as being the end of a chapter, but the police would not release the body.

She had a visit from the Children's Officer. The sister in Australia had said she didn't see what she could do. Mrs. Caulfield said there was no hurry—the children were settling down as well as could be expected. She said it convincingly, but she knew it wasn't true.

She started noting hopeful signs, though. They returned to school, and that seemed to go all right. Little Rosemary, the youngest, regained some of her natural high spirits and sometimes could be heard laughing or chuckling. When Mrs. Caulfield cooked shepherd's pie, Simon made a very good meal of it. But the signs were few and far between. When Margaret did her little bit of homework, Mrs. Caulfield kept the younger ones quiet. But they didn't need much keeping quiet.

She worried about them incessantly. If only they would eat more, if only they would play more. On the second Sunday after the death, she proposed a visit to the bluebell woods. She had always loved the bluebell woods herself as a child. She cut a lot of sandwiches, for they'd eaten very little at breakfast, and she packed them with a thermos of tea and a bottle of orange squash in her old shopping basket. Then they began the trek through fields and lanes to the woods.

Little Rosemary loved the bluebells. She ran among them with delight, and picked masses. The others were much as usual. They responded quietly when she asked questions or made suggestions. They never initiated either talk or play, but walked around quietly, perhaps whispering among themselves. When they ate, Mrs. Caulfield asked them if they liked the egg-mayonnaise sandwiches, and they said they were very nice. She asked them if they liked the ham sandwiches, and they said they were very nice. But they ate very little and soon after they'd eaten there seemed nothing to do but to start back.

Simon carried the basket, and then Margaret. Children liked to feel they were being useful. Conscious that the outing had been a failure, Mrs. Caulfield talked brightly, overbrightly, as they made their way back along the footpath.

"We're going to have to find some way of getting your appetites back again," she said. "I know it's natural you shouldn't feel like eating at the moment, but you'll never grow up big and strong if

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you don't eat well. I think we'll start with breakfast. I hate the thought of children starting the day without a good meal inside them. Shall we try another cereal? You like Chocowheat, don't you? Then if you'd only eat a boiled egg—or do you prefer fried?"

She was going on in this fashion when she realized that she had Rosemary by the hand but was otherwise alone. Turning, she saw that the other three had stopped. They had put down the basket, their heads were down, and they were talking.

"What's the matter?" she asked, going back. "Are you tired?"

There was a new, harsh edge to Margaret's voice as she asked: "How did you know we ate Chocowheat?"

"Oh—well, I suppose I guessed."

"You didn't guess. You were there the morning he died. That was the first day we'd ever had Chocowheat. He'd bought us the packet the day before. Why haven't you ever told anyone you were there the day he died?"

A feeling of bad dream engulfed Mrs. Caulfield. As she began to stammer an answer, the children advanced on her. Suddenly they were hitting her, pummeling her body, the little one kicking her ankles.

"You killed him! It was you! You killed our father!" they were shouting. And then the bad dream descended to darkest nightmare. "We loved him! You killed our father! We loved him! We loved him!"

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

The Four Musketeers waited solemnly for the policeman to say something. Then Hagerdorn stretched his palms out to warm them at the fire and said, "It sure takes the chill off the night." The others tried to keep a straight face, but then the laughter came—with Hagerdorn's bray leading all the rest.

The old policeman took off his hat and, holding it, wiped his brow with the crook of his arm. Barber remembered the man's face mottled by flickering flame and darkness. And he never forgot what he told them.

"You're really something," he'd said. "I expect a person'd have to roll all five of you young men together to make one passable human being."

Yes, you read that correctly. Four Musketeers—five young men, in this unusual (as usual) story from James Powell . . .

BURNING BRIDGES

by JAMES POWELL

As soon as Barber hit the ball off the tee on the sixth hole, he suspected that Billy Hicks was no longer among the living. Barber's stance, swing, and follow-through, all the despair of the club pro, all the reason he golfed alone, had come together perfectly. The high lofting ball cleared the water trap at the end of the fairway to drop like a ripe plum onto the green. Yes, Hicks was dead. When the ball rolled toward the pin and fell into the cup, well, that was just a little something extra. Barber knew enough about golf to know a hole-in-one was luck. But that was Hicks, a great athlete and a real lucky bastard. Up till now. Barber gave a small, sad smile.

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He trundled back toward the clubhouse in the gold cart without retrieving his ball. And he wouldn't mention the hole-in-one. That would only start heads shaking again. People had been doing that for as long as Barber could remember. At first they'd shaken their heads in amazement that the apple had fallen so far from the tree, that Titus Barber had sired so bland, awkward, and undriven a son. Then they tut-tutted over the wild crowd he ran with in high school. But more recently Barber had given those same heads another reason to shake, by totally confounding their early estimates of him. Ten years out of college, not only had he restructured his father's company but he'd come up with a product line that placed Barber Textiles among the country's top three producers of casual stockings for women. Looking back on it, perhaps Barber was more baffled than anyone else by the transformation. Recently he'd come to suspect what Hicks' death now seemed to confirm: that it had something to do with the Four Musketeers.

They'd been best of friends since high school—Billy Hicks, the jock of the group; Sterne, the ringleader, the brain, the one who came up with the ideas; hotshot Hagerdorn, with his bray of a laugh and a knack for organizing things; Lundeen, who, when he wasn't fighting off the girls, would do anything on a dare. And Barber. The Four Musketeers, they called themselves. All for one and one for all. Sterne picked the name, meaning it as a joke on Barber's shortcomings in the personality department. They used to call him "the little man who almost wasn't there." Barber had never minded. Alone, he'd been shy, clumsy, tongue-tied, and not so much unpopular as ignored or overlooked. But with them he'd felt full of life and purpose.

He could still remember his excitement after the prom their sophomore year when Sterne came up with the idea of burning one of the old covered bridges that still served the narrower, less-traveled roads in that corner of the county. The one they chose was a fifty-footer tucked away in a small valley. They came in one car. When the fire was going well, they drew lots and took their turns driving across the burning bridge and back again. It was a variation on the old road game called Chicken, the winner being the one who dared to make the last run. That was usually Lundeen, who never seemed to give a damn—which might have been part of his charm with women. After that, burning a covered bridge became a regular prom-night event for the Four Musketeers. And they always got away with it, although bridge number three had been a close call.

When Barber graduated from high school, his father had wanted

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to send him to one of the big colleges out East. In a rare show of determination, Barber insisted on joining his friends at the state college nearby. Barber didn't do very well there. He wasn't lazy, he was just a plodder. When Sterne put two ideas together, Barber could see them catch fire. When Hagerdorn talked mathematics, it made sense. And when the popular Billy Hicks introduced him around or Lundeen demonstrated the art of charming the ladies (or "wowing the dollies" as Lundeen called it), they made it look like the easiest thing in the world. But when Barber was on his own, no ideas gave off the merest spark, nothing seemed to add up, and people made him nervous—women most of all. In fact, he stood so much in awe of Lundeen's prowess with women that one time Sterne had bounced a paperback off his head from across the room with the angry remark, "Remember, even Don Juan takes off his pants one leg at a time."

But at last, college days came to an end, sending all five of the Four Musketeers on their separate ways. Sterne, who'd been active in theater on campus, traveled to Cape Cod to work as a stagehand in summer stock and later to New York, where he set about writing plays. Hagerdorn enrolled at Wharton for an MBA. Hicks, who'd been at college on a football scholarship, was picked up by a major professional team. Lundeen traveled south to work for an uncle who owned a share in an insurance agency. Barber returned home to Barber Textiles.

Those next few years had been the unhappiest in Barber's life. His father shunted him around from department to department to acquaint him with every aspect of the company over which he would one day preside. Barber plodded from Sales to Raw Materials, from the mill floor to Personnel, leaving many a shaking head in his wake. In his fifth year, he was assigned to the Comptroller's office, which he found slightly more congenial because the Comptroller, a relation of the family by marriage, was a plodder, too.

Then one day, out of the blue, Barber came up with a plan for restructuring the company's long-term debt that was so ingenious he couldn't at first believe the numbers. The Comptroller stared down at the calculations, drummed his fingers, and admitted he couldn't see why it wouldn't work, either. Barber gave a high-pitched laugh. Then the two men hurried off down the hall to Barber Senior. That afternoon the company learned that young Barber had been named to the newly created post of Assistant to the President in Charge of Reorganization.

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The next morning Barber came down to breakfast mulling over a shakeup in mid-level management. Without looking up from his grapefruit and newspaper, his father said, "Says here a friend of yours died. That young Hagerdorn, the one with the whinny, fell down dead getting out of a cab on Wall Street. Heart attack."

Barber surprised himself by how easily he took Hagerdorn's death. He tried to mourn, but felt no real sense of loss. Strange as it seemed, Barber felt closer to Hagerdorn now than he ever had.

During the next few years, Barber made something of a name for himself in the textile industry. A profile of him in *Modern Yarn and Spindle* spoke of the "new lean look at Barber Textiles." Sterne was making the papers, too. He'd had a couple of plays produced Off Broadway, married an actress of reputation, and gotten a divorce. Meanwhile, Billy Hicks, retired from football now with a bad knee, had gone into stock-car racing. And Lundeen had arrived back in town and used an inheritance from his uncle to open up his own insurance agency. Barber and Lundeen met occasionally for lunch. Lundeen hadn't changed a bit. He always looked like he could use a good night's sleep. Barber made sure he got the Barber Textiles business. A year later, Hicks moved back to town with his wife and kids and started a small air-freight company out at the airport.

One summer Hicks rented a beach house on North Carolina's Outer Banks just above Cape Hatteras. Whenever Barber could get away, he would go down for surf-fishing. One long weekend they were joined by Lundeen and a striking redhead named Maura, who wore a big floppy hat to protect her skin from the sun. It was windy the afternoon they arrived and Maura'd had to anchor down the hat with her forearm, which was quickly the color of boiled lobster. By Saturday, she didn't venture out from under the deck umbrella. But she fell sleep in the shade on the deckchair and the sun swung around. She awoke with angry red legs, one marked with a diagonal of white skin where the other leg had crossed over it. Barber remarked to himself that that leg looked something like a candy cane or like the nearby lighthouse except that the diagonals on the lighthouse were black and white.

It wasn't until the fall of that year, on a chilly day with wet leaves in the gutter, that Barber remembered that candy-cane leg and the Hatteras Light and got the idea that that would make Barber Textiles a national name. Lighthouse Legs, they would call them, a line of casual stockings for women based on the unique patterns of shape

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and color of the coastal lighthouses. Everyone in Design thought it was a great idea.

At breakfast the next morning, Barber's father said, "It says here your friend Sterne passed away on Martha's Vineyard. 'By his own hand,' it says." Barber took the paper from his father and read Sterne's short obituary. When he came to the line that referred to the playwright as a maker of "brittle concoctions of vespine dialogue and one-dimensional characterizations," he threw the paper against the wall with an angry force that surprised him.

But he had little time to mourn Sterne. He was busy with the advertising and sales-promotion campaigns for Lighthouse Legs, which he based on a map of the country divided into "lighthouse sectors" instead of states and mock proclamations in the media of penalties for women whose stockings didn't match the nearest lighthouse. The buying public accepted the whole thing as good fun. Two television sitcoms in the same time slot worked Lighthouse Legs into their plots on the same night, a coincidence that made parallel issues of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Lighthouse Legs became the novelty sensation of the women's apparel industry that year. And after their initial popularity, they were as successful a basic in the standard wardrobe as the little black dress and the tweed skirt.

Barber Senior was so pleased with his son's performance that he retired from the company, naming Barber as his successor. At the end of his first year as president, Barber married. While he and his wife were honeymooning in Europe, Barber's father died in his sleep.

Barber met his wife Laurel in the design department at Barber Textiles, where she was attached to the Lighthouse Legs project. She was a tall, vigorous woman with frank, self-confident eyes and a restless air. She had a considerable reputation locally as an artist in her own right and was starting to attract attention on the East Coast with her "charged mobile sculptures," as she called them—like the elaborate remote-controlled construction of firecrackers, pinwheels, and screaming rockets she'd put together for the Fourth of July Statue of Liberty Centennial.

The first time Barber asked her out she refused, seeming genuinely surprised by the invitation. And she kept saying no until he decided it was hopeless. But when work threw them together again a few months later, he asked her out again, he didn't know why—perhaps because she seemed a bit down. She countered with

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an invitation of her own. That coming Friday there would be a show of her work at a gallery in town. Would he take her?

The gallery was bright, and crowded with people and Laurel's charged mobile sculptures. Her work was all electronically programmed now. The one she'd christened "The Answering Machine," for example, responded with raucous noises and mechanical agitation when spoken to. Another, "Twittering Pie a la Mode de Paul Klee," resembled a covered casserole with a divided lid which it fluttered while emitting peeping sounds when approached. If the intrusion persisted, squawking metal bird-heads popped out from inside and finally the lid began to flap as if struggling to make the casserole airborne. Barber thought them very clever, and he was pleased to find Lundeen there with Dixie Thomas—a town beauty, married to one of his agency's biggest clients—proud that for once he was with an attractive woman, too.

After the gallery opening, Barber took Laurel out any chance he got. He told himself that her coolness toward him would change in time. He knew she liked to live well, admired fast cars, and dreamed of leaving Barber Textiles to give all her time to her own work. He told himself he had to be careful not to overwhelm her with an offer of these things. But having given himself all this good advice, he proposed to her within two months of the gallery show. He was almost surprised when she accepted. Billy Hicks was best man at the wedding. Barber would have asked Lundeen, but he'd just run off with Dixie Thomas.

As Mrs. Barber, Laurel played the charming hostess and represented her husband on several civic committees working for good causes. She even made love to him now and then with a kind of hurried frenzy. But time worked no magic. Worse than that, by the end of the fifth year of their marriage Barber could tell that it cost his wife a great deal of effort to tolerate him at all. Unfortunately, he now loved her more than he had in the beginning. When he sold Barber Textiles to an international conglomerate, he told people he meant to read Dickens and manage his investments. But much of his reason was the desperate hope that spending more time with Laurel might turn the situation around.

Golf had come later. The truth was that Laurel complained about having him underfoot all the time. She also told him he was putting on weight. So he took up golf, playing his solitary nine holes every morning. The game gave him his first chance to think about the

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changes in his life brought about by the deaths of Hagerdorn and Sterne. And as he did, his mind kept returning to the words of the old policeman that night so many years before when they'd almost been caught burning down their third bridge.

Sterne had figured people would start to be on the lookout by the third prom night, so, to draw off the local fire companies, he sent in a false alarm about another covered bridge burning about twenty miles away. But while they were standing around drinking beer and waiting for the flames to get far enough along for their game, a township police car pulled up behind them. After speaking into his car radio, a fat old policeman got out and, hitching up his trousers, headed slowly over to them.

"Relax," Sterne had whispered and nodded around significantly. Barber and the others understood what he meant. They'd left everything they'd used to start the fire out there on the bridge.

"What the hell's going on here?" demanded the policeman.

"You tell us, officer," said Sterne. "We just got here." He nodded gravely at the bridge as though the fire was a terrible thing.

The old policeman looked from Sterne to the rest of them. In that moment, they all saw that the old man knew underage drinking was the most he could charge them with. They all waited solemnly for the policeman to say something. Then Hagerdorn stretched his palms out to warm them at the fire and said, "It sure takes the chill off the night." The others tried to keep a straight face, but then the laughter came—with Hagerdorn's bray leading all the rest.

The old policeman took off his hat and, holding it, wiped his brow with the crook of his arm. Barber remembered the man's face mottled by flickering flame and darkness. And he never forgot what he told them.

"You're really something," he'd said. "I expect a person'd have to roll all five of you young men together to make one passable human being."

"It just came over the radio, Mr. Barber," said Roy, the locker-room man, holding out a fresh towel and soap. "Your friend Mr. Hicks was killed in a crash out at the airport."

"Yes, I know," said Barber solemnly and headed for the showers.

As he lathered up, he told himself that the old policeman's words offered the only explanation for what had happened to him. That made "all for one" the operative part of the Four Musketeers' motto now, with Barber the "one"—the one passable human being the five

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of them would make if they were all rolled together. But Barber put a different spin on what the old policeman had said. He saw Sterne, Hagerdorn, and Hicks as if they were parts of himself that he'd loaned out but didn't get paid back until death took a hand in things. And when Lundeen died, he'd be paid back in full—Lundeen's attraction for women would be his. At least enough of it, Barber was sure, for him to hold onto Laurel. Provided Lundeen died soon enough. Hicks' death gave Barber the perfect opportunity to hasten that event.

Barber drove home intending to call Lundeen as soon as he got there. But when he pulled into the circular driveway, a mournful Lundeen was getting out of his car at the front door. "I think Hicks needs a sendoff," said Barber.

Lundeen understood and liked the idea. "One Musketeer's funeral pyre coming up, good buddy," he agreed.

They left the cemetery right after Billy Hicks' funeral and drove back to Barber's separately. They'd bought an old car a couple of days before and left it parked behind the house. The bridge they'd chosen spanned the hundred-foot bed of a river—a mere trickle among the boulders, for it had been unusually dry that year. The bridge would probably burn without much smoke.

Just before the bridge, a small service road angled uphill to the transmission tower of a local television station. But there wasn't any other reason for anyone to come that way except to see the covered bridge itself, the longest in the county. It had escaped the Four Musketeers in their high-school days because a retired farmer and his wife lived right across the way in a small house which, as was the local custom, had been built for them when their children took over the farm. But when the old people died some years back, the house had been sold and moved to a site closer to town. The bridge had board-and-batten walls and a pitched shingle roof. It was painted red.

Driving up onto it was like entering a long, open-ended barn. The planking gave off a low rumble beneath the tires. Halfway across, Barber and Lundeen stopped and unloaded two three-gallon cans of paint thinner, setting them up on the foot-square beams that formed the skeleton of the structure. When they'd parked the car off to the side of the road facing the bridge, they walked back to the two cans. They drenched the middle third of the bridge and gave the liquid

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a minute or two to soak in. Flame skated across the wood when Lundeen tossed down the torch of rolled up newspaper.

Back at the car, Lundeen reached in and pulled out a six-pack which he offered to Barber. Barber tore off the nearest can, they bumped metal and toasted Billy Hicks, then they sat on the hood of the car, watching the fire's progress.

After a bit, Lundeen said, "Billy Hicks buying the farm like that really makes a guy stop and think about back when. And whenever I do that, do you know what gets me? No offense, old buddy, but when it comes to 'back when,' I always start remembering how you were, well, such a royal nothing back in those days. Man, have you changed! You're a different guy. Hell, a couple of different guys. And me, here I am still doing business at the same old stand."

"Still wowing the dollies, you mean?" said Barber quickly, afraid for a moment that Lundeen was beginning to understand.

Sighing like a man who'd just given up trying to put something important into words, Lundeen took a swallow of beer and said quietly, "Sure, still wowing the dollies."

Barber was surprised to find he'd drunk all his own beer. He was nervous. Simple as his plan was, it was not without risk. Of course, he had Billy Hicks' luck and skill going for him. He intended to use Lundeen's daredevil recklessness to make his friend kill himself. No matter how many runs across the bridge Lundeen made, Barber would make one more, until Lundeen—who could never let himself be beaten like that—would be forced to make the fatal run.

Barber threw his empty beer can into the ditch and jumped to the ground. "Musketeers, start your engines!" he said loudly, for he had won the toss to make the first run. Lundeen got down, too, and stood watching the flames with an absent look. Barber slid behind the wheel, pulled the car back onto the road, and hit the accelerator. He'd done the thing enough times to know that the first few runs wouldn't be anything at all. But when he got there, he was surprised to see how fast the flames had spread and to feel how hot the wind was on his cheek as the car raced through the fire. He reached the other end, spun the car around with all Hicks' skill, and drove back through the flames again.

Lundeen didn't get behind the wheel right away. He stood with his hand on the doorhandle, finishing his beer. Then he looked at Barber and said, "We're getting too old for games like this. No, I mean it. Remember, it's only the two of us left now, good buddy." He got into the car. "So I don't want anything to happen to you. I

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want you to take care of yourself." Lundeen smiled. "Starting tomorrow." Then he hit the accelerator and rushed the bridge in a shower of gravel.

Barber watched him go with real affection. He could no more bear Lundeen ill-will than he could hate his own arm or leg. I'm doing us both a favor, he was telling himself as the car reappeared through the flames, its tires smoking.

"It's going up real fast," said Lundeen. But he still insisted they have another beer. "To Hagerdorn," he named the toast.

"To Hagerdorn," Barber agreed, raising the fresh can of beer. The fire had broken out onto the roof now—the flames seemed wind-fed. As he watched, an updraft of hot air burst out through the roof, carrying burning shingles high into the air. They fluttered down into the dry riverbed like spent fireworks. Barber averted his eyes. But he could hear the flames crack and the structure hum like a pipe organ. He took a long drink and forced himself to say, "And how about you? I hear the agency's not doing well. I hear you're planning on leaving town."

"More than thinking," said Lundeen. "Leaving."

"If it's money—" offered Barber. Funny that he could mean this offer, even while trying to get Lundeen to kill himself. When Lundeen shook his head, Barber threw away the beer can and got behind the wheel. He'd meant to drag things out, but the flames were licking up above the entrance now, he couldn't wait any longer. He put his foot on the gas and the burning bridge rushed to meet him.

Half the bridge, roadbed and walls, was burning. Barber felt the shock of the heat as the speeding car barreled into the flames. He smelled the blistering paint. A section of boards collapsed behind him as he passed. Then he was out of the flames and down onto the road again. He clenched his teeth, spun the car around, and sped right back into the flames. Halfway across the bridge, a flaming rafter fell, turning the windshield on the passenger's side into a web of shattered glass before bouncing off to the side. In the next instant, Barber was out on the road again. His whole body was shaking when he pulled himself out of the car.

"Thanks for offering the money," said Lundeen as if he'd never left. "But I can't take it. There's nothing or nobody keeping me around here." He shared the last of the beers with Barber, adding, "A change of place may change my luck." Lundeen took his beer with him into the car and looked back. "Here's to Sterne," he said

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with a smile. "And, listen—no matter what anybody says, remember I never meant to do you any harm."

A puzzled Barber had to fight to keep from calling him back. He watched Lundeen accelerate the blackened car into the inferno of the bridge. The roof was completely engulfed in flames now. The structure crackled and groaned. Suddenly a section of rafters collapsed onto the bridge. Barber shook his head, mourning his friend. An instant later, the car roared out of the flames, scorched and smoking, shouldering a flaming rafter aside as it came.

Lundeen was white as a ghost when he got out of the car. "There's no way you can make it," he insisted, grabbing Barber's arm when he tried to get behind the wheel. "Old Lundeen's won again, right?" But Barber cursed and pushed him aside. He got into the car and put it into reverse for a good running start. "Don't be a damn fool!" shouted Lundeen.

Gritting his teeth, Barber launched the car at the bridge. Ahead of him everything was twisting flames and falling, burning wood. The bridge roared like an animal and Barber roared right back. His anger carried him into the fire and out the other end, where a kind of calm descended on him. As he spun the car around, he knew for a certainty he was going to make it back and that Lundeen would have to make another run and be killed.

He was smiling as he drove back onto the bridge. But suddenly, just as he reached the flames, he heard a sharp bang and the engine cut out. He pumped the gas, but nothing happened. Momentum carried the car halfway out of the flames. Fighting the smoke and the heat, Barber struggled with the unfamiliar doorhandle. Beyond the windshield, beyond the flames, he saw Lundeen's horrified eyes as he dashed onto the bridge trying to get to him. Poor Lundeen, thought Barber affectionately. He understands. In that same moment Barber got the car door open.

Laurel Barber had chaired the fund-raising committee for the hospital's new surgery wing. Now, pale and wearing a small bandage on her forehead, she sat alone in its small waiting room. When the police arrived at her door, she'd expected to be told her husband was dead. Instead they'd said her husband and his friend Mr. Lundeen had been in a bad accident. Lundeen? That was when she'd fainted, striking her head on the corner of the entranceway table. But it hadn't worked out badly. She had only seemed the stricken wife.

She felt better now. The doctor had just come by to discuss her

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husband's condition. He was on the operating table. The doctor said the next few minutes would be critical. He said her husband wouldn't have been alive at all if the explosion hadn't blown out the side of the bridge and him after it—she could see they had little hope for his recovery. Lundeen was another matter. He'd been hit by some flying debris while trying to get to Barber. A bad concussion. Nothing worse than that. He was unconscious but all vital signs were good.

Laurel thanked the doctor. But when he'd gone, she hadn't sat back down. Instead, she went to the window and looked out across the flat roofs, with their collections of air-conditioning and heating equipment. She found it a comforting view, resembling one of her own creations.

Well, after a frightening start, it looked like everything was working out. She hadn't wanted to kill her husband. In a way, she felt grateful for the way he'd let her use him against Lundeen. God knows he never suspected anything, though he'd almost walked in on them, coming home early like that the day Hicks died. They'd been lucky Lundeen's secretary had called when the plane crash came over the radio.

Laurel would have been content to let things go on the way they'd been going since Lundeen had come back to town, but then Lundeen started up again about leaving for good to make a new start somewhere. They'd fought and broken up many a time—never over his one-night stands, she knew the way he was, but over the longer ones like that silly cow, Dixie Thomas. But this time it wasn't another woman. He simply wanted to go away, to walk out of her life. Frantic, she'd convinced herself that it was Barber who stood in the way of their happiness. With him out of the picture and with his money hers, she was sure Lundeen would stay. Or they could go off *together*. Or, if it came to that, she could follow after him.

So even before Hicks died, Laurel had been trying to come up with a way to kill her husband. When Lundeen first told her about the bridge-burning business, their stupid Musketeer funeral pyre, she'd been furious he'd risk his life like that. But all of a sudden she saw it as a tailormade opportunity. She'd made the small detonating device from leftover Statue of Liberty Centennial parts and wired it to the gas pump of the old car they were going to use. She didn't tell Lundeen. He'd never do anything to harm his good buddy Barber. In fact, her most desperate hold over him these last few months had

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been her threat to tell Barber about them if he ever went off without her again.

While Lundeen and her husband played out their grim little ritual, Laurel had been watching from her car on the road leading up to the television transmission tower, the remote-control detonator in her lap. Each time Lundeen drove on the bridge, she thought she'd die. But she waited. The fire had to be just right, large enough so that the car's momentum wouldn't carry her husband out of the flames. The instant after she pushed the button, she heard the fire engines. She couldn't let herself be found there. She drove back down the hill as quickly as she could and didn't even look back when she heard the explosion on the bridge.

Someone was standing in the waiting-room doorway. It was the doctor. He shook his head with regret. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Barber," he said. "There was really nothing we could do."

"I'm sure you did your best, Doctor," she said, in a meek widow's voice.

The doctor gave a small bow and looked away. "It's Mr. Lundeen's case that baffles me," he admitted. "As I told you, all the vital signs were strong."

"Lundeen?" she managed to say.

"Mr. Lundeen died without regaining consciousness," said the doctor. "A blood clot, we expect."

Laurel Barber turned ash-grey. The doctor eased her down into a chair, adding, "The intensive-care people spoke to me just as I was coming here. Funny thing about the time of death they gave me. It's the same as we recorded for your husband's death—I mean, down to the second."

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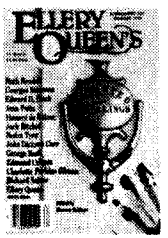

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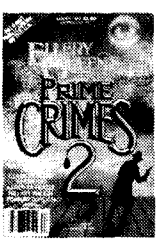

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The women shifted uneasily in their chairs. Outside the house, the warm July sundown was still: the first in three days without the sounds of war. "Can it be over?" said the youngest, a slim, dark-haired woman, her eyes wide with hope.

"They've been fighting for three days. Let it be over," said another, older than the first.

The eldest of the three, grey-haired and stooped, pushed back her chair from the table and walked lamely to the window. "Going to rain," she said. My son is out there somewhere in God knows what condition, she thought, and it is going to rain.

Miriam Grace Monfredo, whose husband is an attorney and whose three children are all currently attending graduate school, has a master's degree in Library and Information Science. She is president/director of a small historical-research company. She has written a weekly newspaper column for The Rochester (N. Y.) Times-Union *titled "Concerning Children," served on the board of directors of Rochester's Children's Alliance, bred and showed West Highland White Terriers, was a Girl Scout leader for three years and costume designer for high-school musical comedy productions, and is currently working on a social history of women in Western New York.*

And has somehow found time to write the following first short mystery as well. Busy beginners, take heart . . .

THE VIGIL TABLE

by MIRIAM GRACE MONFREDO

Three women sat silent in the humid kitchen, their bodies tense, waiting. Restless hands clenched and unclenched, moving over the hard wood surface of the table before them. There was no sound

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other than their breathing, labored and soft in the hot, oppressive air.

The table was oak. Sturdy and heavy and scarred with the memories of four generations, it stood in the middle of the large farm kitchen. Around it were unmatched chairs of varying vintage, built through the years by family members as need demanded. But the chairs were not as one with the room as the table—they came and went like the family members. The table had been in the same place for one hundred years, since settlers arrived in the fertile land of Pennsylvania and built this house.

The women shifted uneasily in their chairs. Outside the house, the warm July sundown was still: the first in three days without the sounds of war. The women looked at one another.

"Can it be over? Can it finally be over?" said the youngest, a slim, dark-haired woman, her eyes wide with hope.

"They've been fighting for three days. Let it be over," said another, older than the first.

The eldest of the three, grey-haired and stooped, pushed back her chair from the table and walked lamely to the window. The curtains hung limp, smelling of mildew. She pushed them aside to look out at the creek beyond the house.

"Going to rain," she said. My son is out there somewhere in God knows what condition, she thought, and it is going to rain.

The young, dark-haired woman gazed up at the beams of wood crossing the span of ceiling and thought: My love—he must be safe. He must. Without him, what will happen to me?

Her fingers traced the scars in the table, feeling for clues to the lives of those who lived here. She was a stranger to the house—she had arrived only this afternoon, shaken and frightened as the battle moved close to her room in the town. She remembered the time she had first seen the house, tucked into the rolling farmland below, on one of her walks in the town above. She had come here a teacher in the quiet white of winter. She was alone—until him. Even after she met him, she was often by herself, and so she walked. She had seen the far-off house as a symbol of the dream she had of a home and family. Yesterday, as the fighting drew closer and her fear became terror, she thought of the house. So distant from the town, it wouldn't have been touched by the war. There she would be safe.

The night had been still, too still, and this morning broke open with the bellow of cannon and the screams of suffering men. Crying

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like a child, she ran, leaving a note to tell him to look for her at the old brown farmhouse on the creek below the Ridge. Please come to me soon, she had written.

Two women, one middle-aged, one old, had opened the kitchen door, saw her fear, and took her in. They gave her bread and cold lemon tea, moving about the kitchen with the unseeing sureness of women who know a room intimately. They said very little. Like her, they were absorbed, threaded into their own inner looms of disquiet and dread. I have never met them before today, she thought, yet here we are, woven together in a terrible vigil. All we can do is wait.

The middle-aged woman left the table, walked to the open kitchen door, and looked up toward McPherson's Ridge. Three days before, the grey-coated troops had marched east-by-southeast of the house and the Ridge—then north toward Gettysburg. Since then, the air had been heavy with the violent noise of gunfire, the smell of powder and smoke. The flames from the fires of the battlefield stretched to the sky and reached beyond to the foothills of God. The war had been far away for three years. Now it had come to her doorstep. Her husband had left a week before, rifle cleaned and deadly in his hands.

She thought of the years since her marriage to the strong, vital man she had known all her life. The marriage had been quiet, contained—there were no children. She sighed, the longing still there, the emptiness unfilled. But they had worked hard and the farm had grown as the marriage had not. Her husband moved in his own place apart from her, becoming remote and closed with time. And then, some months before, he seemed to open and thrive like the greening fields in the warm spring sun. The excitement of the war growing closer, she thought. He loved excitement and there had been little in their years together. She looked up at the sky, darkening with rain-filled clouds and the coming night. Come back to me, she thought. Come back and let us try again.

"Have you always lived here?" said the young woman to the old.

"Always. My parents were born in this house. My children were born in this house."

And all but one gone now. The old woman thought of her babies stillborn, taken before they had lived; of her children that lived a few years before being taken by fever; the others who stayed with

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her longer, the daughters and a son then taken by the hardness of life. And now this last son, threatened by man's hardness to man.

"Mine were the last children born in this house," the old woman said, and looked at her son's wife.

Her daughter-in-law stared at her from the door for a moment, the sharpness between them not dulled with the years, then she sighed, moved back into the kitchen, and sat down at the table.

Outside was darkness now. Large drops of rain began an intermittent splattering on the roof. The women sat at the table in silence, their individual thoughts spinning and weaving into an unspoken pattern: Is he safe? Will he come back?

My lover.

My husband.

My son.

Waiting for footsteps in the rain.

Was that a sound? They turned in their chairs, their hands gripping the table, and looked toward the door.

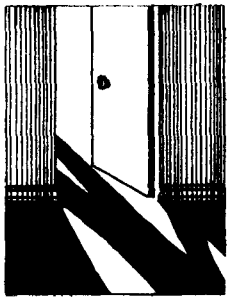
Footsteps. But just one pair of boots splashing through the rain.

My love?

My husband?

My boy?

He appeared in the doorway, his face in shadow. They watched as he came through the door. And as his face became clear in the candlelight, each woman moved from the table toward him, her eyes filled with joy.



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a *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by

PETER TURNBULL

Sussock had lost count of the stairs he had climbed that afternoon, having been dispatched from the police station with the younger Abernethy by Donoghue to commence an immediate house-to-house. The two men had decided to split up and take one side of the street each. The tenements had three flats on each landing, four landings in each close, fifty closes on each side of the street. One thousand two hundred families lived in Blackwaterfoot Street.

A police procedural with one of the most satisfying endings in our reading experience. But no cheating—it won't satisfy if you don't read it from the beginning to the end . . .

STORY FROM A DARK STREET

by PETER TURNBULL

The street was in an old part of the city. It ran due east and west, a long, narrow street lined with tall black tenements. There were pubs on both corners of the west end of the street, Deviney's Bar and The Comet, and grocery shops on either corner at the east end. In the summer a pedestrian could look up and see the blue sky above the tenement roofs, but even in high summer the street received no direct sunlight. Now, in a late November afternoon, it was especially dull. There were low grey clouds, and a fine drizzle fell vertically. It was called Blackwaterfoot Street: even the name was dark.

Donoghue turned his Rover into the street and immediately saw his destination. Halfway along on the left, two police cars and a police van were parked, all three with blue lights flashing. He saw a line of policemen keeping a crowd back from a close mouth. Don-

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oghue drew his car to a halt against the opposite curb, got out, walked up to the crowd, and began to elbow and excuse his way through.

A constable made to prevent him entering the close, then recognized him and apologized.

"Where is it?" Donoghue took his pipe from his mouth.

"One up left, sir," said the constable, who was beginning to lose his patience with a particularly pushy and inquisitive woman.

Donoghue tilted his homburg back and looked up at the tenement. Faces were pushed against the window frames in all the flats except one, and that had its curtains closed. "I see," said Donoghue.

He walked forward across the open space between the crowd and the entrance to the close and the tenement stairs. He found it a clean close, swept and smelling comfortingly of disinfectant. He saw also that the colored china-clay tiles fastened to the wall up to shoulder height had also been thoroughly and lovingly washed down. He enjoyed entering a close like this—more often than not the police were summoned to filthy housing schemes dense with litter and graffiti.

The stairs he climbed were wide and turned in angles rather than spiraled. On the first floor, a uniformed cop stood outside a heavily stained door with *Miller* embossed in brass below a bell pull. He saluted and stood aside and Donoghue entered the flat.

It was a large, solidly built flat with a long corridor and high ceilings. Victorian Glasgow was built to last. Donoghue saw Richard King walk quickly across the corridor from one room to another and called to him. The chubby, bearded young Detective Constable stepped back into the corridor and Donoghue saw plainly that the young officer was white-faced and shaken. Two uniformed officers standing in the hallway, both looking uncomfortably underemployed, also looked white and frail.

"What have we got, Richard?" Donoghue spoke slowly, deliberately attempting to project a sense of calmness and control.

"Well, as reported, sir," said King, "there are three dead. All naked, hands tied behind them, feet bound together, gagged. Dr. Chan has pronounced death in all cases—no dispute about it even to a layman. Their throats are wide open."

"Is Dr. Chan still here?"

"Yes, sir. He's in the sitting room."

"Who found the bodies?"

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One of the two policemen in the corridor stepped forward. "I did, sir."

"They were reported by a neighbor?"

"That's correct, sir." The constable spoke nervously. "The neighbor reported that the front door had been standing open since yesterday, so she rang the bell. Nobody answered, but she knew there had to be someone at home—she was familiar with the routine of the girls. She didn't enter the flat, but she called us. I attended—the street is in the middle of my beat. When I entered, I found the girls as they are now, sir, one in each room—signs of a violent struggle. I didn't touch anything and radioed for assistance. Mr. King arrived—"

"Thank you." Donoghue took his pipe from his mouth and examined the contents of the bowl. "Do we know anything about the girls?"

"Well, they're nurses, sir," King replied. "According to the neighbors, they rented the flat from the owner, a Mr. Miller who's overseas right now. They all worked at the Victoria Infirmary."

"I see. Ages?"

"Not yet determined," King said, seeming to become calmer. "They're all apparently in their early twenties."

Richard King led on. He took Donoghue first into the sitting room of the flat. Here Donoghue saw tables and chairs overturned, a lamp stand knocked over, a vase smashed. The curtains were shut and the light in the center of the ceiling illuminated the room. On the floor in the center of the room was the body of a young woman, lying half on her back, half on her side, with her legs bound at the ankles, her wrists tied behind her back. There was a large red bruise on her forehead. Her eyes were closed and her throat revealed a gaping black slit. Her clothes and the clothes of the other young women lay torn and strewn about the room. There were pools of dried blood on the tabletop, on the settee, on the wall, and on her body. In the corner of the room, the spectacled, awkwardly moving figure of Elliot Bothwell dusted for latents and the Scene of Crimes officer raised his camera and flashed another photograph.

"Where are the others?" Donoghue asked, beginning to feel a little shaken.

"This way, sir." King led Donoghue to a bedroom. It was a small compact room, with just room for a bed, a wardrobe, and a small writing desk. A girl—or rather the naked corpse of a girl—lay face-down on the bed, hands tied behind her back, ankles similarly bound

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together, head on one side, eyes gaping, bruising to head and face, throat cut.

"And the third?"

"The bathroom, sir. Behind you and to your left."

Donoghue turned and went to his left. In the bathroom was Dr. Chan, who had evidently moved from the sitting room. The police surgeon stood over the corpse of the third girl. She lay awkwardly in the bath, one leg over the side, wrists tied behind her, bruised about the face—her throat slit, it appeared, once she was in the bath, her blood having spilled liberally onto the enamel.

"How long have they been dead, sir?" Donoghue addressed Chan. The Oriental police surgeon pursed his lips and said he thought less than twenty-four hours, but the inspector would get a more accurate answer from the pathologist: "All I can do is pronounce death," he said. "They are dead, all three. I think they were killed by having their throats cut, and the bruising to the head and face of all three would suggest that they were rendered unconscious with blows before that was done. Such a shame that it had to happen at all, but especially in this street."

"What do you mean?" Donoghue asked him.

"Well, six months ago, perhaps more, I attended at another address in this street. A young woman had been battered to death with a hammer. A young man did it, I understand."

"I remember," said Donoghue. "I didn't realize this was the same street. There was blood all over the close. A boy by the name of O'Neill was committed to the State Hospital without limit of time. Well, we can't point the accusing finger at him for this one—he's safely behind any number of locks and three rows of good, high fencing."

"Dangerous men abound," said Chan. "Lock one up and another will take his place."

Donoghue left Chan and walked through the flat, looking in all seven rooms—stopping to look especially at the corpses. In life they'd been ordinary, salt-of-the-earth Glasgow womanhood. They were not staggeringly beautiful, they would not have walked the catwalk in life, but by the same token they had nothing to worry about in terms of their appearance. Each had been pretty enough, but one might perhaps have thought her legs too short, another that she was too plump, and it didn't surprise Donoghue to find a pile of slimming

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magazines in the corner of one bedroom. One girl, he thought, might have been self-conscious of her teeth, which protuded just a little.

Donoghue walked down the corridor of the flat, looking for Richard King. He found him talking to Bothwell.

"Anything?" he asked.

"A good number of prints, sir," said Bothwell, blushing behind his thick-lensed spectacles. "I'll need to isolate the victim's prints before I can identify a fourth or fifth set of latents. It shouldn't take too long." He glanced at his watch. "It's five-thirty now. Maybe an hour from the time I get back to the station, sir."

"Very good." Donoghue nodded his approval. He found Bothwell's awkwardness contagious. He always felt more prone to clumsiness or accident in the ten minutes immediately following a talk with him than at any other time. He knew little more about Bothwell than that he was in his late thirties, a bachelor, and still lived with his mother. But that wasn't unusual in this city. A large number of people in Glasgow only left home to get married. In this city, men sat down to a breakfast cooked by their mothers on the morning of their wedding day and returned from their honeymoons to sit down to a breakfast cooked by their wives with no notion of helping to prepare the meal or to wash up after it.

Donoghue asked King if he'd been able to identify the girls.

"Yes, sir." The bearded detective flipped back two pages of his notebook. "We have three names taken from personal effects, we have addresses of next of kin who are being notified at this moment. Two of the girls apparently came from Glasgow, the third from Aberdeen."

"Sir?"

Donoghue turned. A uniformed police officer stood behind him begging his attention, but from a respectful distance away. "Dr. Reynolds is here," he said. Donoghue glanced over the shoulder of the police officer and saw the somewhat striking figure of the tall, silver-haired pathologist entering the flat.

Dr. Reynolds nodded to Donoghue. "What have we got?" He spoke warmly, affably. "Three bodies, I was told."

"Yes, sir. Three young women—nurses, we believe."

"Oh, dear."

"Dr. Chan is still here. He has pronounced death in all cases."

"Well," said Reynolds soberly. "Let's get to work."

"Perhaps you'd like to start in here, sir." Donoghue showed the pathologist into the living room . . .

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If nothing else, thought Sussock, climbing wearily, a house-to-house keeps one fit, and at fifty-five fitness was a commodity Sussock treasured. At least he treasured that level of fitness he still retained. His limbs were strong, his stomach was flat, his face was lean if a little lined. But his chest caused him problems. A smoker most of his life, his chest was gripped each winter with stabbing bronchial pains. He knew the season was approaching long before the leaves changed color in the autumn. He loved the brief Scottish summer and loathed the too-long winter. The sportscar advertisement which read "grips like a Scottish winter, goes like a Scottish summer" had special meaning for him.

He had lost count of the stairs he had climbed that afternoon, having been dispatched from the police station with the younger Abernethy by Donoghue to commence an immediate house-to-house. The two men had decided to split up and take one side of the street each. The tenements had three flats on each landing, four landings in each close, fifty closes on each side of the street. One thousand two hundred families lived in Blackwaterfoot Street.

Sussock was about one-third of the way along the street when he noticed that the amount of care taken with each stair or close was beginning to lessen. Following an initial good impression of Blackwaterfoot Street as being a self-respecting working-class street of Glasgow folk who kept a clean stair and a kindly eye on their neighbor, he was, as he progressed, coming across unswept stairs, graffiti on indoor walls, and chipped tiles, glue-encrusted paper packets, and once, alarmingly, a rusty hypodermic syringe. This last he found in a close mouth and he kicked it out onto the pavement and into the gutter, where he crushed it with his foot and toed the debris into a drain.

It seemed to Sussock that Blackwaterfoot Street had, like so many streets in the city in the hundred-plus years of its existence, developed a "good" end and a "bad" end, with the bad end encroaching on the good. It was no surprise to him to find he was making his way toward the end of the street where stood the pubs. Sussock turned the corner of the stair and was confronted with a heavily stained door, a red door, and a yellow door. He rapped with the knocker on the stained door.

It was opened eventually by a frail lady in a pink frock and spectacles. Sussock identified himself.

"I seen nothing," said the woman. Sussock noted a cluttered flat behind the old lady. "You don't know why I'm calling," he said.

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"It's about the fuss across the street." She seemed to Sussock to have a sharp brain and probing eyes behind the lenses of her spectacles. "Who couldn't help noticing all the fuss—the noise, the flashing lights, all the folk looking out of their windows. So what happened?"

"A murder," said Sussock. "A multiple murder."

"Oh." She didn't seem interested. It was as if the world had no right to intrude into her flat.

"Did you see or hear anything that you think might—"

"No," she said sharply, not at all intimidated by Sussock.

"Be considered suspicious," Sussock said icily.

"I told you."

"No noises, no sounds of violence, strangers lurking?"

"No, no, no. Will you go? I want you to go."

Sussock smiled a tight-lipped smile. He could tell he was onto a loser. "You ought not to open the door so easily to strangers."

"I'm not scared," she replied. "I keep dogs."

"I don't hear them barking."

"They're trained not to bark. I don't want them to bark. What's the point in having them bark if you want to trap the intruder?"

"You're supposed to keep intruders out."

"I don't play games. I keep two pit terriers. If you'd have taken one step farther you'd have met them. They'd tear you apart. That's how I want it."

Sussock stared at her coldly.

"You don't like it? So you don't like it. I find that as you get older, you get away with more and more. It's one of life's compensations for aging. You'll find out soon enough—I can see you haven't got far to go yourself."

"If you should hear anything—" said Sussock, but the door was already closing.

He rang the bell of the yellow-painted door. No answer. He rang the bell of the red-painted door. No answer. He turned and climbed up the wide stone stairway to the next landing. It was par for the course, really—one hear-and-see-no-evil, two out to be revisited. On the next landing were three darkly stained doors, each one by sheer coincidence occupied by a family called Smith. Thoughtfully, each occupant had put his initial before the surname, but it would still be confusing for the postman. But that's door-to-door, Sussock told himself, you meet people you wouldn't otherwise meet and see things

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you wouldn't otherwise see, like three Smiths not only in the same close, but sharing the same landing.

Working the other side of the street, Abernethy was making slower progress, but still turned up nothing except "I didnae see anything, son," and unanswered doors.

Donoghue returned to P Division police station at Charing Cross, signed in, checked his pigeonhole for any messages (there were none), and went up to his office on the C.I.D. corridor. He took off his overcoat, hung it on a hanger, and put his homburg on the hatstand. He sat at his desk, phoned his wife in Edinburgh, and told her that there had been a murder and he had to see the inquiry started, at least—if it looked like being an extensive investigation, he'd certainly hand it over to the senior man on the back shift, but he couldn't leave it at this stage.

Mrs. Donoghue sighed as she always did on such occasions and said that she'd leave a casserole in the oven. She hung up before he could thank her.

He replaced the phone. The first item of information was already on his desk. The three deceased had been identified as Susan Cram, aged twenty-two; Gillian Mason, aged twenty-three, and Vivienne Mogg, also aged twenty-three. All nurses. The formal identification by next-of-kin had still to take place, but that, read the note from King—a trifle tautologically for Donoghue's taste—was a mere formality.

His phone rang. He snatched it up. "Donoghue."

"Er, um, Bothwell, sir," said a hesitant voice on the other end of the line. "It's Bothwell, sir—Elliot Bothwell."

"Yes, yes, Bothwell."

"Well, I have lifted all the prints I could find in the flat, sir, and sent them to the collator. Mr. King asked me to pay special attention to a knife he found—it seemed to have been tossed away behind a settee."

"Oh?"

"Yes, sir. Had blood on it. I was able to get a good thumbprint. I sent it to the collator marked for special attention."

"Good."

"Well, that's it, sir," said Bothwell, and Donoghue could imagine him blinking behind his thick-lensed spectacles while gripping the phone tightly in a fleshy, sweaty palm.

"Thanks," said Donoghue. "I shall await contact from the collator."

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He replaced the phone. Things were beginning to move. The knife sounded like an interesting discovery. Promising, in fact. He had the feeling that this inquiry would be a "fast mover."

The landlord of the bar kept his eye on the man.

The man was "Rivet" O'Neill and he was big and tall and heavy. He was drinking hard tonight. Soon he'd be singing, and he was the one man the landlord couldn't prevent from singing, because Rivet O'Neill did exactly as he pleased all of the time. The landlord watched O'Neill discreetly. He had noticed a change in the pattern of the man's behavior.

He glanced to his right and saw both of his female assistants were also watching O'Neill discreetly. It wasn't that Rivet O'Neill was drinking—he drank every night and sometimes picked a fight before going home—it was that he was drinking earlier than usual and harder than usual, and also that he was drinking in both The Comet and Deviney's Bar, crossing and recrossing Blackwaterfoot Street after every two or three pints of lager. Usually he came into one of the bars at about six-thirty and was often the last to leave at eleven P.M. He seemed to alternate his nights between The Comet and Deviney's, and that worked very well for the landlords of the pubs, there being an odd number of days in the week that neither pub had to endure him.

Saturday night he was at his worst. But tonight he was sharing his time between both bars. Inside both, his behavior was as normal, standing in the center of the floor, carving out a massive area of personal space while other patrons stood crammed against the wall rather than stand within ten feet of him.

That, thought the landlord of The Comet, was the second strange thing to happen today. The first was those three lassies getting butchered. The talk was that they had been hacked to pieces. And now Rivet O'Neill was sharing his time between the two bars, drinking like there was no tomorrow.

Rivet O'Neill had been *the* hard man of Blackwaterfoot Street for as long as Tom Leddy could remember, and Tom Leddy had been the landlord of The Comet for as long as most people in the street could remember. And Rivet O'Neill was, so far as Tom Leddy could tell, just a ned who never grew up, except in that, along with his balding head and spreading middle, he had grown to enjoy a certain notoriety. He did his time in youth custody and then in adult prisons, all for crimes of violence—no style, just impact and blood. His rep-

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utation grew over the years and it wasn't without foundation. Tom Leddy thought that only the dullest or most thick-skinned individual could fail to detect the easing of the atmosphere in the street when Rivet O'Neill was inside, and only the same sort of individual could fail to notice the steadily growing tension, or fail to notice how much more brazenly did Mary O'Neill walk the street, when word got round that Rivet O'Neill was coming out.

By the time he got to his late thirties, Rivet had proved himself, as it were. He walked down the street and people moved out of his way. He walked into the fish-and-chip shop, went to the head of the queue, and walked out again with a good fish supper. And he didn't pay, of course he didn't pay. He'd come into The Comet or Deviney's, walk up to the gantry, and the punters would clear a path for him. The first pint was always free, and if the landlord detected a meaner than normal attitude on Rivet's part then so were the second and subsequent pints. Tom Leddy discovered early on that whether you ran a bar or a grocer's or the fish shop, you didn't take much money from the O'Neill family. You just budgeted for the loss.

Once in a while—or so Tom Leddy had observed over the years—Rivet would feel that his presence needed reinforcing, that someone needed a wee reminder, and if a patron, say, was unwise enough or inexperienced enough to hold O'Neill's gaze instead of averting his eyes, then that person would be in for the sort of kicking that required an extensive period in hospital to repair the damage. Of course, no one would have seen anything and of course the recipient would have no idea who jumped him. *Or* her, for Rivet wasn't so particular—and, anyway, a proper hardman tanks women as well as men.

Eventually violence begets violence. Literally. Rivet O'Neill sired one child, a son, who grew up in the spill of his father's beam, and, as Tom Leddy recalled as he watched Rivet lower his glass and look round for someone to fight, the boy grew up to be almost a model of his father. A thug at school—who could bully and extort with impunity, being the son of Rivet O'Neill. But Boy O'Neill always had a strange look in his eyes—a cold, glassy expression always giving the impression that what was going on in his mind wasn't what he was doing or saying.

And he differed from his father in one other way that the landlords of The Comet and Deviney's Bar probably noticed more than anyone else. Rivet O'Neill could hold his drink, Boy O'Neill couldn't. Boy O'Neill got uncontrollably drunk very early and very quickly,

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and when he did he flew into violent rages. He became bad news to Tom Leddy and to Muckle Murphy over in Deviney's. When Rivet O'Neill came into a bar, the other punters stayed. They didn't stare at him and didn't stand near him, but they came in and stayed in and kept both bars in business. Tom Leddy knew that if Boy O'Neill had been anybody else, he would have been bounced into the street and banned for life without a second thought. But he wasn't anybody else—he was Rivet O'Neill's son and Tom Leddy wanted to retire with the use of his legs and with his eyesight retained.

Tom Leddy watched Rivet drain his glass and bring it down heavily on the shelf which was fastened to the pillar against which he'd been standing. Other men in the bar stood back and looked downward as he staggered to the door. Leddy recalled the time, and a bad time it was, when the two men, father and son, were enjoined by a shared notoriety. It was no longer just Rivet and Boy O'Neill, but the O'Neills. They walked down the street side by side, and during those two years Mary O'Neill was at her most brazen, getting free food from the groceries, getting other women to carry her bags. Then Boy O'Neill had killed the girl. That was something that Rivet O'Neill had never done. All right, he'd put a good few people in the hospital, but he had never killed.

Tom served two pints of lager to a man and a woman. It was unusual to have a woman in The Comet, the men didn't make them feel welcome, but Tom Leddy didn't ponder the issue—his mind was on the O'Neill's. He served a guy in an oily cap, the men began to press to the gantry, talking louder and more freely, someone put money in the jukebox. Rivet O'Neill had walked out of the door and taken a lot of the tension in the pub with him.

Tom Leddy remembered how Boy O'Neill had filled in that girl—a messy job with a hammer. He'd had everything he ever wanted in life and he just couldn't take no. So he played up to the girl, wanted her to go with him, talked at her, almost shouting, but the girl said no and kept saying no—it had been in this very bar, Tom Leddy and thirty or more other people had witnessed it. But he was Boy O'Neill and no one dared go up and, in the best tradition of Glasgow people, say, "Look, son, she says no and she means no, so leave the lassie alone and don't argue, because there's thirty of us and any one of us could be her father and there's just one of you." You just couldn't say things like that to Boy O'Neill—not in Blackwaterfoot Street. The girl had screamed a final no, got up, and walked out. Boy O'Neill followed her. She got about ten yards, just to the first close—Boy

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pushed her into the close mouth and took out a hammer he carried in his coat pocket. He was still pummeling her mashed skull in an uncontrollable rage when the law arrived. It took six cops to lift him into the jeep. Only one sentence was possible: detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure at the State Hospital, where the patients call the nurses "sir."

After that, Mary O'Neill walked even more brazenly and got even more groceries without paying for them. You just didn't say no to an O'Neill.

That was about six months ago, thought Tom Leddy. No, it was more—today was the first of November, and the girl had been killed on the first of March. It was eight months to the day that Boy O'Neill had killed the girl.

As Tom served a man a pint of beer, he buckled slightly at the knees and steadied himself on the beer pump.

"You all right, Tom?" said the man. "You seem pale."

Tom straightened the pint before the man. "Yes, I'm all right, Jock, nay bother. I just realized something, that's all." He called to the nearest assistant and said he was just going in the back for a minute. The girl said okay and cheerfully pulled a pint for an old man.

In the back room, Tom Leddy sat heavily in a chair as the realization crashed into his mind at high velocity. What was so devastating was not the fact that he knew it was Rivet O'Neill who had chopped up those three lassies, and that he was drinking what he knew would be his last drinks at both The Comet and Deviney's, but why he had done it.

It was the whispers. The whispers had started just a week after the slaying of the girl by Boy O'Neill. Tom Leddy had begun to hear them in the bar—whispers such as: "You think Rivet O'Neill is hard. I tell you he can't hold a candle to that son of his—his son is a pure animal." Or: "Rivet hard? Don't make me laugh. That son of his could buy and sell him ten times." Or: "I saw the mess in the close before it was cleaned up. Boy O'Neill's more of his father than his father ever was."

Tom Leddy sat in the small back room of The Comet, breathing hard, absorbing the impact. One of the problems with being the Top Cat in the street, he saw now, was that nobody talks to you, so you don't get to know what people are saying, or at least not until months later—like about eight months later. And even then, more than

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likely the whispers reached Rivet's ears because Mary O'Neill overheard something in the grocer's and went home to tell her husband what was being said about him and his son.

The telephone rang. Donoghue reached forward and picked it up.

"Collator, sir," said the crisp voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes." Donoghue picked up his pen.

"We've identified the prints on the knife found at the scene of the crime—the murder of the three nurses, I mean."

"Yes, yes."

"The knife is believed to be the murder weapon, but that has to be confirmed yet—the lab results on the blood haven't come through."

"Come to the point, will you?"

"Yes, sir. The prints belong to one Rory O'Neill, generally known as 'Rivet.' Has an address literally across the road from the locus of the offense. We haven't heard from him for some time, last offense was an assault to severe injury about ten years ago. I checked a bit further and found that his son was sent to Carstairs for life for a murder which was committed in the same street just eight months ago."

"Right," said Donoghue. "Thanks. We'll bring him in for questioning, see what he has to say for himself." He replaced the phone. It rang again almost immediately.

"Switchboard, sir," said a female voice.

"Yes?"

"Gentleman on the line name of Leddy, sir. Has information about the multiple murders in Blackwaterfoot Street."

"Put him on, please."

In the cramped room in the back of his pub, Tom Leddy leaned against the wall with the phone pressed against one ear and his hand held over the other ear. "—Has to be," said Leddy. "He's drinking his last drinks and he knows it. He's just waiting for you to lift him. He must have heard those whispers. It took him long enough, but he heard them. Man's got no brains—couldn't stand the thought of being upstaged by his own son. You'll find him in Deviney's Bar right now."

Donoghue sent a squad of cops, but Rivet O'Neill came quietly, swaggering across the hushed floor of Deviney's with a slight smile on his lips and a look of pride in his eyes.

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In the interview room, he said, "Course I did it. You took your time, didn't you?"

Back in his office, Donoghue glanced at the clock. It was still not nine P.M. Outside it was dark and the drizzle still fell. The case had been opened and shut within four hours. He wished they could all be like that.

No. No, he didn't, he didn't think that at all—how could he even allow such an attitude to enter his head, however fleetingly? This was one case he could have done without. Three nurses in the prime of life, slain because of one man's twisted and perverted pride.

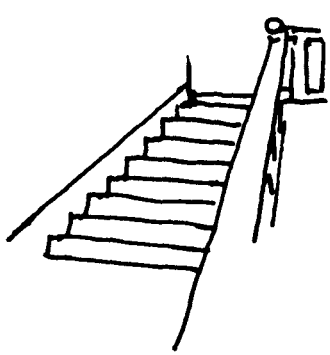
He had just put on his hat when his phone rang. He looked at it and wondered whether or not he had already left the building. He decided he hadn't and answered it.

"Switchboard, sir. There's a lady, a Mary O'Neill, wants to talk to the officer who arrested her husband this evening."

"Put her on," said Donoghue.

"See you," said the woman huffily and Donoghue pictured her tapping her feet indignantly as she spoke. "See you—someone has just tossed a brick through my window and I want to know what you're going to do about it."

"Nothing," said Donoghue. "Nothing at all."



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Just as mysteries are enjoying one of their boom periods, short stories generally have seen a renaissance of attention in recent years. Thus the increasing number of original anthologies and single-author mystery collections is not so surprising.

An Eye for Justice (Mysterious Press, $16.95) is the third Private Eye Writers of America anthology, edited once again by that organization's guiding spirit, Robert J. Randisi. Not all the contributors are in top form, but Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone story, "Non Sung Smoke," is a standout, and the entries about Michael Collins' Dan Fortune, Rob Kantner's Ben Perkins, and James M. Reasoner's Cody are strong ones. John Lutz and Josh Pachter collaborate on a Nudger story that fans of the Queenian dying message should enjoy reading and picking holes in (which I can't do without giving away the solution). Among the other sleuths on board: Max Allan Collins' Nate Heller, Bill Pronzini's Nameless, and editor Randisi's Nick Delvecchio. Richard S. Prather provides an entertaining Introduction.

This department has recently noted new books of stories by John Lutz, Lilian Jackson Braun, and Joseph Hansen. Below are two more new and welcome single-author collections.

*** Loren D. Estleman: *General Murders,* Houghton Mifflin, $16.95. These ten adventures of Detroit private eye Amos Walker have all been previously published in original anthologies or magazines, four of them in *AHMM*. Estleman writes the private-eye genre like a fastball pitcher who challenges the hitters: straight down the middle, providing all the classic elements, with little gimmickry or pretentiousness. Done as well as Estleman does it, that can be immensely satisfying. Especially good is "The Prettiest Dead Girl in Detroit," offering a plot of novel-worthy complexity and a fresh turn on a standard private-eye surprise.

*** *Mignon G. Eberhart's Best Mystery Stories,* Warner, $3.95. The amazing Eberhart debuted in the 'Twenties and still produces new novels today. Copyright dates on these stories range from 1934 to 1958. The first nine, comprising 144 of the volume's 375 pages, are previously uncollected and have brief introductions by the author. Several feature an old *EQMM* favorite, banker-detective James Wickwire, and one, "The Old Man's Diamond," an entertaining shipboard sitcom-mystery, concerns Nurse Sarah Keate. The five novelets from previous Eberhart collections tend to be most rewarding, however, especially the frequently reprinted Susan Dare claimant story, "The Calico Dog."

**** Tony Hillerman: *A Thief of*

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Time, Harper and Row, $15.95. Separate series characters until *Skinwalkers* (1987), the author's two Navajo cops, Joe Leaphorn (middle-aged and iconoclastic) and Jim Chee (young and traditional), again join forces in the case of a woman anthropologist who disappears while hunting pots in Anasazi country. Hardly anyone is writing pure detective novels as well as Hillerman, and this is another outstanding one.

*** James Anderson: *Additional Evidence,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $12.95. One of the field's nimblest plotters, recently occupied as *Murder, She Wrote* novelizer, Anderson presents an author-reader game in the jack-in-the-box vein of Richard Neely, Francis Durbridge, and Martin Russell. A model is murdered in an English coastal town, and the main suspect's wife joins forces with the victim's brother, a Scotland Yard inspector, to investigate.

*** Bill Crider: *One Dead Dean,* Walker, $17.95. We've had plenty of academic mysteries set at great seats of learning like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and California, but too few at small denominational institutions like Hartley Gorman College in Pecan City, Texas, where the faculty never quote Latin and Greek or discuss their teaching disciplines but are up to their ears in campus politics. Crider's eye and ear for the background are unerring, and listmaking English chair Carl Burns is an amateur detective worth a return visit.

*** Gabrielle Kraft: *Screwdriver,* Pocket Books, $3.50. The second book about L.A. lawyer Jerry Zalman, following the Edgar-nominated *Bullshot,* is an agreeable throwback to what someone called the "what fun" school of mysteries, popular in the 'Thirties and 'Forties. It's long on farce, slapstick, and mostly funny dialogue, relatively short on detection. The cover blurb is a Hall of Fame candidate: "It's a New Age murder with all the trimmings—love, sex, money, tofu . . ."

** Shizuko Natsuki: *The Obituary Arrives at Two O'Clock,* Ballantine, $3.50. Though no actual golf is played in this novel, two kinds of golf clubs figure in the plot: one kind is the murder weapon, and the organizing and financing of the other kind (including its racket potential) is described with the enthusiasm and thoroughness of a Japanese John D. MacDonald. Otherwise there is bad news (excessive length, repetitiousness, and a sometimes stilted translation) and good (a carefully worked out plot with a final revelation that is worth waiting for).

** Dolores Klaich: *Heavy Gilt,* Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, Florida 32302, $8.95. This most recent example of the lesbian detective novel features private eye Tyler Divine, whom the other characters (for some unfathomable reason) all address as Detective Divine, as if she were official. There are some interesting characters, good writing, and undoubtedly much strong emotional and intellectual content for the book's primarily gay audience, but unlike

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another Naiad title recently reviewed here (Claire McNab's *Lessons in Murder),* which delivered the whodunit goods, this one's a total fizzle as a mystery despite early promise.

Now in paperback (and likely to please and gross out approximately the same number of readers) are two of 1987's best novels, James Ellroy's grim, disturbing, and compelling fictionalization of an unsolved L.A. murder, *The Black Dahlia* (Mysterious Press, $4.95), and Robert Campbell's *Alice in La-La Land* (Pocket Books, $3.95), second in his tough, brilliant series about private eye Whistler's probings of the underside of Hollywood. Also newly reprinted are Nancy Pickard's 1987 book, *Marriage Is Murder* (Pocket Books, $3.50), fourth in the Jenny Cain series, an involving and well peopled whodunit concerning a series of murders of abusive husbands, and Joe L. Hensley's *Robak's Fire* (Paperbacks, $3.50), a strong 1986 entry in the rewarding series about Midwestern lawyer Donald Robak.

Among older books in new editions are Warren Murphy's locked-room mystery, *Leonardo's Law* (Paperjacks, $3.95), a funny and ingenious tale that achieved undeserved oblivion on its first publication in 1978; Christianna Brand's *Tour de Force* (Carroll and Graf, $3.95), a 1955 case in which Inspector Cockrill vacations on a Mediterranean island and unravels one of the most dazzling formal puzzles I've ever encountered; Henry Cecil's 1963 novel *Independent Witness* (Academy Chicago, $4.95), including some of the best and most extensive courtroom action of its author's long career; and two of Robert L. Fish's brilliantly constructed books about Brazilian detective Jose Da Silva, *Always Kill a Stranger,* first published in 1967 and *Brazilian Sleigh Ride,* 1965 (Foul Play/Countryman, $4.95 each). A notable hardcover reissue is Elspeth Huxley's 1937 mystery-writing debut, *Murder at Government House* (Viking, $16.95), a good specimen of Golden Age puzzle-spinning with a fluid style and a strong African background.

A story by Dashiell Hammett first published in *Liberty* as a three-part serial in 1933, subsequently reprinted in *EQMM* in February 1950 and later in a Queen-edited paperback collection of the same title, gets its first hardcover publication in *Woman in the Dark* (Knopf, $15.95). It's a powerful crime story (if not in a league with the author's best private-eye fiction) and Robert B. Parker contributes a good Introduction. But billing as a novel a book of 76 wide-margined pages (seven of them either blank or used for chapter titles) is stretching things a bit.

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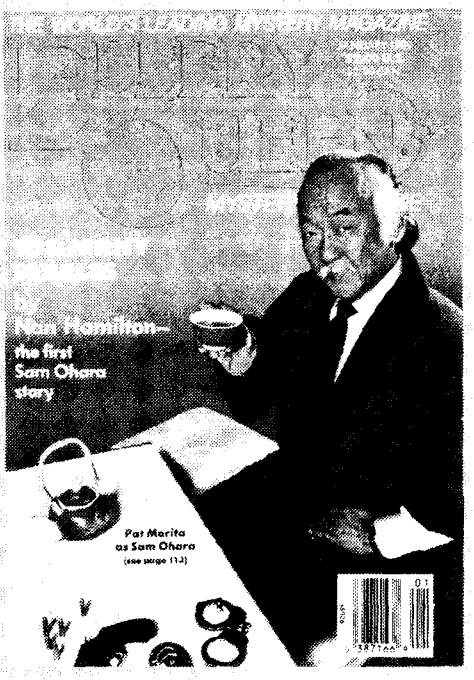

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"This is a fairly routine assignment, Ramon," the Chief of Detectives said. "Here are your papers. They're forged in case anyone inspects them too closely. Tubal won't, but we're not after Tubal. We're after whoever prints those phony food stamps. And we want the plates."

Terry Mullins' first professionally published fiction appeared in the November EQMM and his second in the Mid-December EQMM. Not a writer to rest on his laurels is Mr. Mullins . . .

ROUTINE ASSIGNMENT

by TERRY MULLINS

The Chief of Detectives surveyed Ramon and smiled. "That should do it. Sneakers, jeans, and red T-shirt. But why do you have *Phillies* printed on it? Why not *Ole!* or something like that?"

"If I want them to think I'm an American tourist in Acapulco, I have *Ole!* printed on it. If I want them to think I'm a Latino in Philadelphia, I have *Phillies* on it."

"Okay. This is a fairly routine assignment, Ramon. Here are your papers. They're forged in case anyone inspects them too closely. Tubal won't, but we're not after Tubal. We're after whoever prints those phony food stamps. And we want the plates."

"Just how suspicious is Tubal? He took me on fast enough."

"That doesn't mean too much. Cheap help is hard to get these days. But I don't think he has any idea we know he's been selling counterfeit food stamps. There's no sign that he had anything to do with Lynn's death—I think that was personal. But she's dead and we've got to have someone close to Tubal's. When do you start?"

"Tonight. From five until two in the morning—at the minimum wage."

"Good luck."

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Tubal's convenience store was a fairly dangerous place to work. It was a twenty-four-hour business and had been held up five times in two years, always during the early-morning hours. It had a good corner location across from a liquor store but a rough class of customers. Twelve pumps for gas (self-serve and pay the cashier before you pump the gas), two vending machines for colas and one for cigarettes, a line of packaged pick-up food that the school kids mopped up, a corner display of magazines that drew a lot of old guys with unsteady hands, a grill for hotdogs and hamburgers, three coffee-makers, and the back half of the store full of canned goods and dairy items where young and middle-aged women paid sinfully high prices for things their daytime jobs kept them from buying until the last minute. There was something for almost everyone and Tubal was making a mint.

Ramon showed up for work at a quarter to five, was given a full-length apron with *Tubal's* printed across the chest, and was told to make a hoagy. He carefully put too much on the first one so that Tubal—an earnest black man five years out of the Navy—could tell him the right way to make a profitable hoagy. Then Tubal and his sister Henrietta turned the store over to his brother Wash and Ramon.

Work followed a simple routine for a week. It changed on a Thursday night.

All went busily until about seven at night. "Put four dogs on to warm," said Wash as he took most of the large bills out of the cash register, counted them, jotted down the amount, and put them in the safe. Ramon put the hotdogs on the rollers under the heat lamp. He had already learned why Tubal's hadn't been in trouble over phony food stamps. They knew stamps as well as the police did and accepted only good stamps. But they sold counterfeit stamps to a couple of dozen selected customers for use in other stores. They sold a lot of them.

At seven-thirty, a patrol car pulled up in front of the store and two officers came in. Wash drew them two cups of coffee and signaled to Ramon to fix some hotdogs. The officers accepted the hospitality without making any effort to pay: their presence meant that the place was safe for half an hour or more as they talked with Wash and relaxed over their snack.

A little after nine, business picked up again and Ramon and Wash stayed busy until eleven-thirty. Then Wash looked at the empty store and said he was going out for a beer and would be back in a

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little bit. The store was quiet for about ten minutes, then two cars full of teenagers bought gas and livened up the neighborhood for a while. One girl bought coffee and said pointedly that she was driving.

They left and a weather-beaten Pontiac parked in front of the store under the burned-out light. A middle-sized, middle-aged man got out. His most noticeable feature was a beer belly that forced his belt almost down to his groin. Ramon recognized him as someone whose picture had been among those shown him by the chief when briefing him on local criminals. Unfortunately, Ramon couldn't remember who he was or what his line of crime was—he didn't have the sensationalist's easy comprehension of scandal and the ability to personalize it. He didn't think of people in terms of the crimes they had committed. It had been one of the most difficult tasks he faced in undercover work to see people in terms of the danger they represented—to society and to himself.

The man came in, looked around, bought an *Inquirer*, and asked for Tubal.

"He's off tonight. Wash is working—he'll be back in a little bit."

The man belched, went back to his car, and drove off. Wash came in as soon as the car was off the lot. "What did that guy want?" he asked.

"He wanted Tubal, that's all."

"Give me my gun."

Ramon opened the toolbox under the counter and brought out the pistol. Wash, who was left-handed, hung it on a special hook under the counter at the left side of the cash register. "Call Tubal," he said.

Ramon went to the store phone in back and pushed the re-dial button. Tubal answered quickly and swore when Ramon described the customer. Ramon rejoined Wash, who stayed close to the cash register for about five minutes. When nothing happened, they got bored and started cleaning up.

The car must have pulled up quietly from the blind side of the store, because all of a sudden two men were in the store waving guns at them before Wash could make a move. They made Ramon open the cash register and they took the bills, cursing when they found only a ten, three fives, and eight ones. They pushed Ramon away from the register and toward Wash. "Open the safe," they demanded.

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Wash shrugged. "It's on a timer," he said. "It won't open until eight in the morning."

"You're lying," the one with the beer belly sneered. "You'd have more in the register if you couldn't open the safe. Now open it or I'll shoot the both of you."

Wash walked over to the safe as the door opened behind the holdup men.

"Don't make any unwise moves, Greasy," a newcomer said to one of the holdup men. His voice was soft and vicious. "My boys don't use pistols. They have Uzis pointed right at your backs. Now put your guns on the counter."

The holdup men were too scared to look around. They knew the voice and did as they were told. Three men had come in. The speaker was a short man in a dark-brown suit with grizzled grey hair showing beneath a soft brown hat. The other two were thugs with Uzis. The man in brown nodded to one of them, then spoke to Wash. "Where's your gun?"

"Under the register."

The thug walked behind the counter, shifted his Uzi to his left hand, and picked Wash's pistol from the hook.

"Use it," the man in brown said.

Ramon watched in quiet horror as the thug shot Greasy and his partner, one shot each. He had never seen murder committed in such a cold-blooded way. The little man was a fool, of course, but he was the most dangerous fool Ramon had met in his five years of undercover work. The almost hypnotic obedience that everyone gave the man appalled Ramon. The threat of being shot had prevented Greasy and company—including Wash and Ramon—from opposing him. And his thugs obeyed in the same mesmerized fashion as everyone else. He might have been an Aztec priest cutting the heart out of an obedient living victim. Ramon had to fight against his own submission to the man's projection of power. He told himself that this was just another gang member building up his reputation for swift and violent retribution.

The man in brown walked to the counter, took the two guns the holdup men had left there, and placed them beside the two bodies. He held out his hand for Wash's pistol. The thug gave it to him and he gave it to Wash.

"Washington, my friend, you have just foiled a holdup. Call the

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police and tell them about it. Ask for their help. Remember, you two were alone."

"Yes, Mr. Poratha."

"How did you do today?"

"About average."

"Do you need any more stamps?"

"Not yet. We may need more by the weekend."

"You'll get them." He turned to Ramon. "Who are you?"

"Ramon Pina."

"And where are you from?"

"Puerto Rico."

Poratha turned to Wash and asked, "Is this one to be trusted?"

"Yes, Mr. Poratha."

Poratha turned back to Ramon. *"No parale usted la boca a uno?"*

Ramon shut off an immediate reply, looked questioningly at Poratha, and said, *"Que?"*

"Habla usted como una cotorra?"

This time Ramon replied promptly, "No, senor. No, sir. I do not speak out of turn."

Poratha turned to Wash again and said, "I was afraid he might be a Mexican. I do not want any of my outlets closed because they employ illegal aliens. You'd better check his papers, anyway."

The three men left and Wash called the police on the public telephone. Ramon asked, "Did Tubal call him?"

"Of course."

"Why didn't he call the police?"

"The police might of got shot—or you or me. It's neater this way."

The police arrived in force and questioned Wash and Ramon—but mostly Wash because they didn't speak Spanish and Ramon suddenly spoke mostly Spanish. They took pictures, remanded all three pistols, and carried the bodies away. It lasted almost two hours and drew quite a crowd—a hungry crowd. When the police weren't questioning them, Ramon spent most of the time at the service window selling coffee and hotdogs. Wash handled the potato-chip and soft-drink people. Ramon wondered where they all came from.

At two o'clock, a large, aggressive black woman named Flora—some relation to Tubal's wife—took Ramon's place and he went to his room over Mr. Hernando's empty garage.

Friday went about as usual, except that there was a bit more

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excitement because of the night before, and some customers came out of curiosity and bought the expensive soft drinks.

Ramon had the weekend off. As usual, he spent the weekend selling soft pretzels with mustard at the zoo, a job that let him do pretty much what he wanted to do when and where he wanted, and with so many people that no one stood out. Lieutenant Bronz showed up with his wife and three hungry kids. Bronz came over to buy soft pretzels for the lot and Ramon reported at length. Bronz listened carefully and said, "Put more mustard on that one."

Sunday afternoon, he had scarcely set up his pretzel stand when the Chief headed straight for him with a dazed teenager in tow. "This is Roy, my nephew," he said. "He's going to wind up your pretzel business. You and I are going to move you out of Hernando's garage."

"What happened?"

"One o'clock last night, a patrol car drove past Tubal's and saw the lights just being put out. There was a Nova in the parking lot with the motor running. The officers called in and pulled into the lot. Two men came out of the store with automatic weapons blazing. Schwartz was wounded and Doolin was pinned down so he never got a shot at them. Two of our cars intercepted the Nova and chased it down West River Drive. There's a narrow underpass and a curve at one point and the Nova didn't make it. They hit the underpass. The car spun around, flipped over, and exploded. One man was burned to death. The other was thrown fifty feet and died on the way to the hospital."

"What about Tubal's?"

"Wash and Flora were in the back room with their hands tied behind them. They'd been shot in the back of the head."

"Poratha."

"No doubt about it. He made a big macho gesture by having Greasy and company killed in front of you and Wash. He was showing off his power, impressing the world. His men would tell their friends about it. Then he thought it over and saw that you two had witnessed a murder he had ordered. So he sent his thugs around to kill both of you and make it look like a robbery. But you had the weekend off and Flora was working the whole night. So they killed Wash and Flora."

They pulled up at Hernando's. The Chief helped Ramon stuff his clothes, toothbrush, and towel into a footlocker, then he dropped him at Ramon's home in Kensington. "Come to headquarters as soon

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as you get properly dressed," he said. "I'm going by the morgue to pick up the things they found on the killers."

It didn't take Ramon long to shower and change. It felt good to be in a suit again. Jeans and a T-shirt can be mighty boring after a while. He even enjoyed knotting his tie. It also felt good to be alive, he realized.

At headquarters, he found the Chief and Lieutenant Bronz setting out on a long table the things they'd found with the deceased killers. Two Uzis were half melted. A wallet, a notebook, and a beer can were charred. Another wallet, a silk handkerchief, some keys, and a letter were in good condition, probably taken from the one who was thrown free. Bronz added a few more items and that was the lot. It seemed little to represent two men who had lived for things you could handle and touch and own. Only the letter suggested anything personal.

"Ramon, you take the stuff that was burned. Bronz, you start with the letter and the good wallet. I'm going to see what we can get on the license and the car-registration number. I don't expect much."

Most of the burned stuff was useless. The wallet fell apart when Ramon tried to open it. The ashes of currency spilled over the table, the denominations indecipherable. Only a driver's license and some credit cards were in recognizable condition. Ramon made notes of the name and numbers. The contents of the notebook were burned to cinders, but the stiff cover had curled and was intact. It was a promotional gift and the name of the company that gave it away was the Palimpsest Paper Company, with a Philadelphia address and phone number. Ramon copied these carefully and went to find the Chief.

Half an hour later, he, the Chief, and Bronz were discussing their findings. The letter and wallets proved almost useless, but the paper company was easily located. It was in a rundown part of North Philly. The Chief had people looking up the owner and the history of the company. "This is probably where Poratha buys the paper he prints the stamps on. He promised Tubal a new supply soon, so that may mean he'll be buying paper. Would he have it delivered or pick it up?"

"Pick it up," Bronz and Ramon agreed.

"Yes, I think so, too. He wouldn't want any more people than necessary knowing where he prints the stamps. So we'll watch the paper company and track down anyone who picks up supplies there.

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We'll also find out where they deliver—just in case we're wrong about that.

"There are boarded-up row houses across from the paper company. Bronz, you and Ramon set yourselves up there and report on everything that goes in or out. We'll have cars in the area to follow their visitors and their deliveries."

"Won't the owners of the vacant houses know we're there?" Bronz asked.

The Chief laughed. "Yes, I guess you could say so. The city owns the whole block."

Next morning, Bronz and Ramon settled down to the dull business of watching the paper company. They reported that the morning shift arrived at eight o'clock and seemed to consist of all Korean workers, mostly women but some men. Then at ten o'clock two Caucasian men unlocked the driveway gate and headed toward the garage. Bronz said he thought they might be going to make a delivery and Ramon relayed the information. Then they saw a thin stream of smoke coming from the back of the building.

"They've set it on fire!" Bronz shouted. "Warn the people in the building! I'll get the fire department!"

Ramon rushed downstairs, squeezed through the loose boards on the front door, and ran across the street into the paper-company office, where two old men sat talking. Ramon flung the front door back, grabbed a chair to prop it open, and yelled, "Tell your people to leave! The building's on fire!"

The men didn't understand him. They hollered in Korean and one came to reclaim his chair and close the door. Ramon didn't argue with him but ran across the office to a door in back. It opened into the work area.

There were some twenty employees working in a large warehouse. Everywhere he looked Ramon could see combustible material. He shouted that everyone should leave, the place was on fire. No one seemed to understand. "Does anyone speak English?" he roared. A teenaged girl came timidly forward. "I speak a little," she said.

"Then tell everyone they must leave at once! There is fire! Understand? *Fire!*"

She understood. She called to the others and they understood quickly. All of them quit what they were doing and made for the door. Ramon saw an explosion in the back and smoke and fire poured into the room, spreading fast.

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Making sure everyone was out, Ramon followed the crowd. The office was jammed, but no one seemed to have panicked. About half of them were already in the street.

As Ramon left the building, the fire trucks arrived and he got out of their way. So did a small man in a driver's uniform.

Ramon drew his pistol. "You're under arrest, Mr. Poratha," he said. "Where is the man who was with you?"

Poratha looked at the gun and tensed. "He fell and knocked himself out," he said. "He's in the garage. I was going to get help."

"If he's dead," Ramon said, "you'll have three murder charges against you instead of two. I suppose you own the company."

"Yes, but it's insured."

"That's the least of your concern. I suppose you printed the food stamps right there."

Poratha wilted completely. "I want a lawyer," he said.

"Q"

DID YOU MISS A KEY ISSUE? BACK ISSUES AVAILABLE

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an intriguing reprint by

JUDY LOPATIN

Where Leila had once ventured into the night and encountered Helen's jealous rage, as an older and wiser Leila she stayed home and out of Axel's way. That was how he wanted it, anyway. But she should have known he was too young and stupid to take care of himself—she should have warned him about the dangers of trick-or-treating.

Judy Lopatin is the author of a short-story collection, Modern Romances *(Fiction Collective, 1986), which the* New York Times Book Review *called "a debut of cool wit, wide range, and promise." This story first appeared in* Between C & D, The Lower East Side Fiction Magazine. *For your information, that's Avenues C and D in the Lower East Side of New York . . .*

THE HERE AND NOW

by JUDY LOPATIN

When he died, he was wearing a mask. That was a shame, since the mask obscured some of the most beautiful features God ever created—in the Baltic, of all places. He was an exchange student, he was my fiance; but then he fell in with a disreputable crowd, and in that crowd were the ones who put the mask over his head and shot him.

Secret lives converged at his murder. The crowd of murderers delighted in keeping their killer instincts hidden; naturally their meetings were clandestine. But Axel, too, had his secret—that secret was me.

It was Axel's idea to keep our engagement secret. (A stupid idea, since I might have saved him.) He found it necessary, sometimes, to play upon his beauty, to give it away in exchange for certain

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favors. Life is hard in the city, he used to say, sometimes measures have to be taken, sometimes compromises have to be effected. I'm paraphrasing him; his command of the English language was not as great, say, as his beauty. But I knew what he meant: life is tough, the nightclub scene is seductive, and so are you, my love, and I know you don't mind sharing my body occasionally.

This, then, is my story—mine and Axel's. Not the story of Axel's murder; that story belongs to the murderers, and the tabloids. Once I, too, had a story as sensational as the murder of the man in the mask, or nearly as sensational, the tabloids lost interest. And as for the future, I don't intend to grace the pages of the tabloids ever again. I don't intend to get murdered, wearing a mask or not wearing a mask. In fact, in my case, the idea of getting murdered in a mask is ridiculous.

In *any* case, that way of dying is ridiculous—conjure up the picture of that kind of death, look at the photo of the mask you have seen in the tabloids, think of what it means to die wearing a mask. The picture is too obvious, just as beauty is sometimes too obvious. Axel's beauty was. Too obvious, too transparent—at least to me. Others might have shaken their heads in admiration, bewilderment, even rage, seeing in the perfection of Axel's face only a mask of perfect beauty, behind which nothing could be discerned. But then, these others might not have been discerning types. They might have been blinded by desire, or envy. They didn't see the light behind Axel's blue eyes—the light of utter incomprehension. And then, that dawning stupidity. Once I understood how stupid Axel was, it was easy to make him love me. All I had to do was convince him that I was a mind-reader.

I am not really a mind-reader. Once I thought I was, and in this sincere if misguided belief I made quite a good living as one. I had a cabaret act. Cabaret acts are quite popular in the city these days. Often they bill themselves as "performance art." In the days when I billed myself as Leila, Clairvoyante Extraordinaire, my act was not quite so a la mode, nor as popular. Still, I made a living, and in those innocent, embryonic days I made the acquaintance of many fringe artists, some of whom were at the club the night I met Axel.

By that time, I was a little old to be a nightclub habitué. I was several years older than Axel, who was, despite his beauty, no young lamb. But my past, always more glamorous in retrospect, inexorably drew me back, temporarily, into this twilight world. Once there, I

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generally had a dull time. I had long since given up drugs and so I usually drank until I felt insensible and less bored with the passing parade. I knew fewer and fewer of the people who (according to the fashionable magazines) mattered and the survivors from my day were mostly failures. They had been, perhaps, too pure to succeed. The new people, strangers to me, seemed to be freaks of a peculiar aesthetic: minor celebrities, businessmen, murderers.

This insight, of course, is ex post facto. At the time, I didn't recognize the murderers. And even ex post facto I couldn't identify the ones who killed Axel. What does the lack of a moral sense look like? Does evil wear a smile? Does it look as innocent as Axel looked? But Axel was not evil, he was only oblivious. It got him killed, I guess. By one or more men (or women) covetous of his favors, who might have thought he was rejecting them. Did he laugh in their faces? Did he just smile that vague, beautiful smile of his, that smile that looked as if nothing could ever affect him, nobody could ever hurt him?

I can understand that. I cannot understand the actual murderous plan—the actual strategy, the games those monsters played with him to make him whimper, the death mask they slipped over his head, the weapons they chose—but I can, sometimes, understand the murderous rage that Axel's smile might inspire. I often felt it myself. In the middle of the night I would wake up and look at Axel's face, so perfect, sleeping beside me. What most enraged me was that in sleep, a million miles away from me, it was no different than in what we call real life—that same slight, maddening smile on his sweet sleeping lips.

It was an enticing smile, nevertheless. When we first met, he smiled at me, and I fell utterly in love with him. I was smart enough not to let him know it. In the best tradition of romantic comedy, I heaped abuse on his head. He smiled more. He knew I wasn't serious. How could I be? He was beautiful and I was not. He liked my spunk, he said, and asked me to the movies.

It was some time before I told him the truth about my past. I had almost forgotten it myself. The childhood part, and the cabaret part. But of course they were connected. They were also buried in some little-used place of my mind. At the time I met Axel, I was making a normal living in an office—I had forgotten how enticing superlatives could be.

His beauty, at first, bewitched me; but after that, it was his faith

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in me, his absolute belief that I could read his mind. Did I say I had to convince him of this to make him love me? That was a lie. He convinced me. He renewed my faith in myself. Once I had believed I could read minds, and then I had a long dark period, during which nothing turned out right, and more than once on the cabaret stage I was publicly, horribly humiliated and I gave up my calling. But then Axel came along, Axel who was so stupid that anybody in his right mind could tell what he was thinking. Maybe nobody else was arrogant enough to tell him so. Maybe they were afraid of hurting his feelings. But I had a past as a mind-reader. I finished his sentences for him, I told him what he was about to say. And he fell for me utterly.

His smile, my mind.

I held onto my powers of reason for a week or two. I told myself that I was not so marvelous as Axel said I was; it was only that Axel was as easy to read as, say, a book. In the last four or five years had I ever correctly predicted what anybody else was going to say or do? If so, I should have been more successful, not only as a cabaret performer but also in the business world. But I wasn't. I repeated to myself the lessons of my own history. I told myself that the childhood incident, the one that had gotten my story and picture in the tabloids, was just an accident—a lucky guess in the nick of time. I had thwarted an evil mind, I had saved my face, but I had not done anything so extraordinary as to lead me to a career as a clairvoyant.

In the first place, I should never have billed myself as a clairvoyant. People expected too much. But I was confused; I didn't know the nomenclature of the occult. I was just a kid, in the beginning—I thought I could read minds. But I didn't necessarily think I could see the future—not the far future, anyway. It was only the present which I was, for a time, capable of guessing. My subjects were firmly rooted in the here and now, usually seated in a folding chair before me on the stage, on the verge of saying or doing something quite commonplace. (Surprisingly, many of them had the idea of closing their eyes and going to sleep. Were they confusing me with a hypnotist?) Inasmuch as I could hear a word a moment before it was spoken, see a thought a fraction of an instant before it became an action, I could see "the future." But to believe this, you would have to believe the present does not exist, and that would be a shame.

So I was no clairvoyant, or prophesier, or divinator, but a mind-reader. In this area of life, the old-fashioned terms are best. Besides, the ESP business implies a mutuality, a telepathy, I was not capable

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of: just because I could read their thoughts did not mean they could read mine. And, of course, in the end I wasn't even sure I could read their thoughts. I was just lucky once, and then I was lucky for a time. The only reason I thought I was a mind-reader in the first place was that I knew, in an instant, what that witch was thinking about doing before she did it and had the presence of mind to prevent it—and she was too blind with rage and fury to see what I was thinking, or to feel my fear.

She wasn't really a witch. Witches exist, but they are older and wiser; they decide to be witches. This "witch" was merely witchy, or merely evil. She was a schoolmate of mine, a strong-willed girl who nevertheless found herself coming down with a fever on the night of Halloween.

I have not seen her since that fateful night, but I have often wondered what has become of her. Sometimes I imagine that I see her in a nightclub, grown up, her face strangely familiar but altered, not by lye but by her own invidious predilections, grown more grotesque by the accumulation of years and nastiness.

That is what I would like to think. I would like to think that, contrary to romantic fable, evil does not wear a deceptive mask. But then I remember that Axel's alleged murderers look no less angelic than he did. Then I realize that Helen is, no doubt, happy and beautiful today.

And I? Though I saved my face that Halloween night, I am neither happy nor beautiful. Now that Axel is gone and I'm getting older, I wonder if it was worth the effort. If I had succumbed to Helen's strong will, I might have saved myself my disappointing career—I would have grown accustomed to the lonely but noble life of the disfigured.

She threw lye at my face. But I knew what she was about to do a moment before she did it and hastily jerked my Halloween mask down over my face. The lye splashed over the mask. Its cheeks burned. Only one cheek burned, actually. As soon as I pulled the mask down, I turned my head away from Helen and her rage, and so even though my mask had eye-holes my eyes escaped in the other direction.

That was the story the tabloids reported. They were more interested in the logistics of the drama than in the motives behind it—and so was I, but for a very different reason. Helen's motives were so obvious to me that I didn't want to dwell on them. She hated me

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because of my mind, but that in itself wasn't enough for her to succumb to the sudden temptation to throw lye in my face, not even under the circumstances of her fever. Of course she was jealous of my trick-or-treating when she was sick and confined to her bed, but she was even more jealous of the attentions I was receiving from a certain boy in our class, of whom she was desperately enamored.

I knew Helen was enamored of this boy. I knew he liked me better and I knew I was glad he liked me better, since I had never cared for Helen much, anyway, and especially since she was so pretty. I even knew where Helen lived, and that she had a fever, and that nobody so strong-willed would stay in bed where she was supposed to be. Why, then, did I go to her house, ring her bell, ask her for treats?

Why, then, after I simply pulled down my mask and looked away, thus saving my face, did I think I had a gift for reading minds, when I had been so blind up to that point?

We tell ourselves stories—lies that make us feel safe for a time, even if in the end they do not keep us safe. I told myself that Halloween night that Helen was, after all, my friend, and that the boy didn't really matter. And years later I told myself that Axel really loved me, and only me, and could come to no harm, even among the rich and famous who coveted his favors. The passage of time had, nevertheless, improved my powers of self-protection. Where I had once ventured into the night and encountered Helen's jealous rage, as an older and wiser Leila I stayed home and out of Axel's way. That was how he wanted it, anyway. But I should have known he was too young and stupid to take care of himself—I should have warned him about the dangers of trick-or-treating.

The way he wanted it, our life together (a sweet and harmonious life, I swear!) was a secret to the world. The way I wanted it, his other life, the one in which I was perpetually absent, was a mystery to me. It was a mystery I thought I could penetrate if I wanted to—hadn't I spent years in nightclubs and cabarets before Axel had even left the Baltic? But I didn't want to. It was enough to know that his heart wasn't really in this life (I could still read his mind that far), I didn't need to know what he did, or with whom. I know you don't mind sharing my body, he said at the beginning, but of course he knew nothing of the sort. I did mind, but I shut my eyes and turned away and refused to guess what conquest he'd made that night.

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Eventually, for all his stupidity, Axel seemed to understand what was going on. His reports of his amorous encounters began to be less frequent and less fact-filled, and where once he would tell me everything that happened in an excited, breathless, naive way now he would only mention meeting so-and-so and why they were important—and this in a toneless, matter-of-fact way. At first, I was grateful for his new reticence, for what I took to be his fear of hurting me—never guessing that in fact Axel was only afraid of betraying how much he was being hurt by these important people. Ex post facto, I can see it was my jealousy that blinded me. But at the time, as Axel's thoughts and actions became more and more opaque, as I understood less and less of what he was doing (less than I wished!), I thought only that I was again losing my mind-reading powers. I never dreamed that I was slowly losing Axel.

Naturally, there were clues and signs, clues that only an idiot could have failed to recognize. Axel staying out all night, most nights, returning with bruises on his beautiful body. Axel cowering unexpectedly at my friendly, romantic-comedy words of abuse. Axel sleepwalking out of our bed, away from my sight and touch. It was only the last sign that disturbed me. I would wait up all night for him, and when he finally returned to me I would sink instantly into a deep grateful sleep. But on these nights, or mornings, that Axel would leave our bed and unlock the door and wander off into the corridor, into the unknown, he would remember nothing when he awoke.

The somnambulistic Axel never thought to relock the door upon his return and I never worried that somebody might come into our unlocked apartment and violate me. Since the night I thwarted Helen, I felt myself inviolable, invulnerable. But Axel was such an innocent. He was only dimly aware of the passions he aroused in his waking state, what brutal desires might he incite, what harm might he come to when he was totally asleep. Those nocturnal wanderings of his disturbed me more than anything I thought he might be doing in his other, secret life. Because I knew that he was near and yet far, in the land of that vague sleeping smile.

On the evidence of the unlocked door, I trained myself to stay up all night and not sleep at all. I concentrated on the sweet curve of Axel's shoulder, so much more human than his perfect, mocking face. I told myself how much I adored him, I willed him to stay right where he was, in my bed. It worked for a while. But I was never sure if my powers were responsible, or only coincidence. And after

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too many sleepless nights, I began to wonder if it was worth it. Axel was sleeping beside me, but he was oblivious. Beautiful, but perhaps too beautiful to belong to me. And it was no use trying to wake him—he was exhausted, and I was exhausted, too. Eventually, I succumbed to sleep, to my own oblivion, to my own private dreams and nightmares. But I convinced myself that in the face of real danger I could wake up in time, that even in my sleep I would see Axel, and save him if danger was near.

As it turned out, Axel was miles and miles away from me when he was speeding toward his murder, speeding away from me and my powers to keep him and save him. I wonder now if, in his stupidity, he was glad to be escaping me, to be going on a supposed ski-holiday in the company of important people. Out of sight, out of mind. No doubt he was happy that for a few days he wouldn't have to worry about his poor has-been of a fiancee, waiting at home for her beloved with all the blind trust of the lover. She would wait, and in the meantime he would enjoy himself.

Was Axel, after all, so stupid? Nine out of ten times it would turn out all right, at least for him. He would have a nice ski-holiday and make the acquaintance of people who could further his career—even if he did have to humble himself in the process. (On the other hand, he might not have had to humble himself. Axel knew he looked good skiing—it was his natural element. Perhaps he thought the tables would be turned this weekend. He wasn't being unreasonable. His fatal flaw, in the end, was only that he could not truly recognize evil—and in that he was no more stupid than I.

I wonder now how many murderers, or future murderers, ascended the stairs to my stage, how many of them were thinking murder while I vainly struggled to read their minds. In the beginning, years ago, they were only thinking about going to sleep, or whether they had turned the lights off in their apartments before going out on the town, or whether their lovers were cheating on them; they were only thinking that they would suddenly break into song-and-dance or confess a secret love. All quite commonplace things, things they liked to think about but would probably never do. Once I predicted these thoughts, my subjects were generally so astonished that they admitted I was right—then they forgot to carry out their plans. Nobody ever actually went to sleep on stage, or danced or sang, or disclosed the name of the secret love object. It was as if I'd stopped

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them cold before they'd done something they would have regretted later.

I saved them from doing something wrong—but really those wrongs were not so important—at the worst, they would only have proved embarrassing. On the other hand, by merely owning up to these thoughts my subjects suffered a certain amount of humiliation. Desires, reasons, motives they had thought secret were suddenly exposed before a mocking, heckling audience. At that excruciating moment it didn't matter that there would be no real consequences of their idle dreams and wishes. In the long run they were safe, but on stage, in the here and now, they suffered.

And so did I. I must confess that after a while I began to feel guilty about exposing the inner workings of my subjects' minds. I told myself that it was hardly my fault that they thought stupid things, and after all it was my job to report them, but on the other hand they were so stupid they had no idea I could really read their minds. My audience did not take me seriously. In their eyes I was a charlatan at worst, an entertainment at best, and under those circumstances they weren't afraid to submit to my powers. But of course I knew all this—in those days, with those people, I could read their minds. Perhaps it was unfair of me to take advantage of them. Perhaps I felt so guilty that for the greater good I shut my mind's eye and let my powers die.

That is what I would like to think. What I'm afraid to think is that I was perfectly fine at my job (a perfectly fine job) until the murderers started to multiply—until there were so many murderers in the city that it was inevitable that some of them would come to see me. I'm afraid to think that something about my cabaret performance attracted these murderers, that before I knew it they were all clamoring to come onstage, sitting in my folding chair, refusing to let me read their minds— Or possibly daring me to read their minds—and leaving the stage smug and happy that I was utterly incapable of doing so.

That was, of course, in the past. But is it any wonder that if I couldn't see evil sitting in front of me, laughing in my face, I would fail to see it escaping me? We may have inhabited the same city, frequented the same nightclubs, but in the end Axel's killers chose the countryside to act out their murderous impulses. I can understand that—the city is a party to violence, a wild party, but the country is a natural theater for violence.

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It is the naturalness of that violence that blinds some people. Axel, for instance, loved and trusted the countryside—he couldn't see evil in hills and mountains, he took snow and ice at face value and they warmed his heart. And perhaps he was right. Perhaps there is nothing wrong with snow and ice, even if they can kill people. But Axel forgot that there were also manmade things in the country—moats and drawbridges and the comfortable, elaborate resorts of the rich and bored. Or maybe he did know very well what went on at night in such rich interiors, isolated from the judgments of the world. But he never imagined that anything could happen in the country, or that it might have such fatal consequences.

The night of his murder I was, as usual, at home. Exhaustion from the workday had set in and I was so glad to have temporarily escaped the world of business that it didn't occur to me to be sorry that Axel was out on the town without me. I would watch a movie on television and wait for the telephone to ring. Axel, when out on the town, would invariably call me once, usually before anything embarrassing had happened to him. If he forgot to call me before he had suffered his first humiliation of the night, I could detect a note of fear in his voice. And he knew it. What we had on the telephone was the closest we ever came to telepathy. Distance seemed to serve him well. Maybe since he couldn't see what was going on in front of his face, in an idiotic way he could see what was farther away. He often speculated on his family in the Baltic, on what they were up to, and for all I knew his speculations were right on the mark. In any case, after a few painful telephone conversations he trained himself to call me at a safer, earlier hour.

But the night of his murder, he failed to call me. I was exhausted, too exhausted to feel sorry for myself, so I made excuses for him—he had taken too many drugs, suffered a loss of memory or consciousness—temporary losses, I thought. Even at the moment of his death—a moment that is even now disputed, since he may have been stabbed to death before he was shot—I felt no premonition of disaster, I heard no cry for help. It seemed like an ordinary night. Yet Axel had not called.

I thought back on the two nights of my life that had not been ordinary, the night I had thwarted Helen and the night I had met Axel. Both extraordinary nights, at both of which I had been present in flesh and blood.

That night at the nightclub, Axel saw me from a distance and

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smiled at me. I could hardly believe my luck, that this godlike creature had even noticed me. I didn't know that Axel, in those innocent days, smiled at everybody. Blindly, I crossed the room, pushed my way through the crowd, ignored the greetings of my former friends, until I was face to face with the beautiful stranger. Up close, I saw that he wasn't only a stranger but a foreigner, and that even in his incredible beauty there were slight imperfections. Perhaps this realization gave me the audacity to taunt him about his beauty, then guess what he was going to say to me. Just the standard line, no doubt. But I was so helpless in my then state—suffused with drink, dizzy with lust—that sheer luck, or providence, must have guided me. Axel later repeated to me everything I had said. At the time, I was much too oblivious to know what I was saying. This was my standard way of falling in love.

What I didn't know, didn't dare to guess, was that Axel would be different: that he would love me back, and even call me the next day. And the day after that and the day after that—a present that stretched out indefinitely into the future. That had never happened to me before. Not because I wasn't beautiful—I wasn't beautiful, but I was attractive enough. What I wasn't was successful enough. Everybody in the city nowadays wants to fall in love with somebody who can transform their life (even if that somebody is not willing to do so); at the very least, they want somebody who will add luster to whatever life they already have. I could have done that, in the old days, when I was a successful mind-reader, except that I scared men away. They were afraid of my powers. It had little to do with my being a woman, I think. My powers scared or annoyed everybody. Most people do not find it flattering to be read like a book—they like to think they are more complicated than that.

Axel was different. Less complicated, more trusting. He may have been stupid, but he was also European. He didn't read books, but he revered them, and he was flattered to be read like a book. He was also, no doubt, too new to the city to realize that I was a has-been. When he did realize that, he might have turned away from me as the other, smarter ones had—but by then he was enchanted. Or, after all, smarter. He knew that in some obscure way he needed me.

But it didn't take many nights on the town with me—our arms entwined, our status as a couple professed—before Axel realized I would never help his career. He was an exchange student, but he wanted to be a star. A model, an actor. He was a good actor—he was

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certainly good at living a double life. And like many successful actors, he was intensely practical. With luck, he would have succeeded. He had everything he needed: beauty, charm, blind faith, a loyal mate. I was either loyal or stupid. Who else would have agreed to the charade of a secret engagement? He only proposed marriage to placate me. It was a mystery to me when, if ever, this marriage was going to take place. We talked about it as if it were in the far, far future. Perhaps Axel could clearly see it. But to me, living in the here and now, it was only a vague hope.

Had I confessed this hope, vague as it was, to any of my friends, they would have thought me deluded. Axel and I had done our work too well. Nobody knew we were living together, much less engaged. For all intents and purposes, Axel had dumped me ages before. In fact, once he had decided to exchange his body for favors, he persuaded me to go out to nightclubs once or twice a month on my own. He planned these nights carefully. We picked parties that would include past celebrities and present ones, my old friends and Axel's new pals. I would go off and mix in the world I was leaving behind with a crushed and forlorn air. Axel wasn't quite cruel enough to come to the party and pointedly ignore me—he would absent himself for the evening on some plausible pretext—an invitation to the country, say.

Nevertheless, I felt him by my side as I circulated through the crowd. When I walked by Axel's new friends, who had once viewed me with jealousy and contempt, I turned my eyes away and walked on. When I bumped into old acquaintances, the survivors and failures, I would tell them pathetically about how I had been dumped—I wasn't a bad actress myself. And after all, I did feel crushed, forlorn, and pathetic, and they had no trouble believing me. After a few nights of this, I was able to stay away from nightclubs without fear; my friends would not try to find me.

Helen, that Halloween night, was hiding. She was home in bed with a raging fever, she couldn't put her mask on and go trick-or-treating. But perhaps she didn't want to. Her fever was just a pretext, or a consequence: she was not flushed with fever, but livid with rage. Ex post facto, I can only guess at her state of mind. But I know with certainty that when she threw the lye at me, it was a passion of the moment.

Yes, she was livid with rage. It wasn't just the sight of me, but of the boy as well—for all I know, she might have been aiming at

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him. Did I say that the boy we fought over was by my side that night, that we were trick-or-treating together? Did I forget to say that? Helen would never have forgotten to mention that, no matter how happy and beautiful she is today; in fact, the more happy and beautiful she is, the more likely she is to point to her extenuating circumstances. In Helen's mind, I was never a victim, I am still a villain. Does anybody in the world take childhood infatuation seriously? Helen did. There was no premeditation to her crime, but there were causes. She had been humiliated. She had done everything in her power to make that boy like her, and he had only laughed in her face and invited me out that night instead.

At first she did the honorable thing. She came down with a fever, she absented herself from the fray. She tried to quell her murderous impulses and thought instead of the sweetness of that boy's shoulder. She told herself that I was really her friend and that the boy didn't matter. She had no way of knowing that we would come to her door and taunt her, ask her for treats.

Hello, Helen, we said. We were young and cruel—but I swear we didn't know how cruel we were being. Helen wasn't wearing a mask. She was pale and she turned paler.

I'm sick, she said. We thought she was just explaining why she was at home. We were only mildly surprised to find her there. This was, anyway, what I thought—the boy didn't say anything to the contrary. I'm sick, Helen said again, just a minute. She ran away, leaving us standing on her doorstep. We waited for her, without thinking.

Now I can guess what happened to Helen while she was gone. She ran from us, and then flung herself against a wall and heaved with sobs. Her face was covered with tears, ugly with them—almost disfigured—but she couldn't stop crying. She couldn't go back and face us. But we were waiting for her, and she knew it. She thought about putting on her Halloween mask, as yet unused, to hide her agitation—but she knew that would look peculiar. Children are afraid of doing strange things, they know what is expected of them. Helen knew she had to pretend that she didn't mind about that boy and me. So she found a sink and washed her face. And saw the lye and had the idea. Or she had the idea, then found the lye. It might have been premeditated, after all.

Here, she said, and flung the lye in my face.

I had the presence of mind to turn away in the nick of time. But

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you know that. What you don't know is what Helen's face looked like when she came back with the lye, said "Here," and threw it in my face. And I cannot tell you—it was all too quick, and I looked away. But I realize now that there were at least two moments, the act and its consequence, and I wonder what happened before I looked away. Was Helen's sick impulse written on her face? I wonder now if, between finding the sink and finding the lye, Helen had a chance to wash away her tears. I know she wasn't wearing a mask. Nothing was hiding her face. Yet I cannot picture it. Was I too oblivious to notice anything so obvious as a tear-stained face? Or am I afraid to remember what I saw? Maybe I did see Helen's tears. Maybe they told me something important, important enough to save my face; but in that case, the moment that led to my mind-reading career was nothing more than a moment of ordinary perception.

Now it's impossible to say. According to the tabloids, I was nothing less than a mind-reader. Those headlines were sensational. I basked in my glory, I gloated over my picture in the paper. I hated Helen for what she had tried to do to me—but did I believe everything they said about me? Probably I did. It was, after all, my story—the tabloids got most of their information from me. They knew what I told them and what the boy told them—as a witness, he supplied much of the logistical information. As for the rest, they used their imaginations. Tabloid reporters have good imaginations. In their own way, they made sense of the incident: I was an innocent victim, but I was also a mind-reader. I believed at least half of that story, at the time.

Nobody knew what Helen thought, for she was in the custody of the police and advised by her family lawyer to say nothing. It was good advice, I guess. She was sent to reform school, or a sanitorium, or both—I forget—but only for a little while. I'm sure it was only a temporary thing. Helen was too young to suffer the rest of her life from a moment's passion.

In the long run, only consequences matter. What use is it to guess at motives? Motives never convict anybody. Axel's murderers will probably escape scot-free. Important people, like young people, are used to getting away with murder. Beautiful people, too.

Axel, for a time, got away with murder. And if I had been young enough, beautiful or powerful enough, I might have, one fateful night, murdered Axel myself. Innocence might only be the consequence of luck, or weakness; virtue may only be a delusion. God knows I had many delusions, and Axel, who had such faith in me,

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such faith in me that he feared and humiliated me, was responsible for most of them.

Or was he? Now that he is gone, I find myself blaming him. He failed me, I failed him. I could not save him. But then I remember, seeing through the dark shroud of the past, that in the beginning it wasn't Axel who convinced me that I had extraordinary powers. It was Helen. It was that horrible lye. I couldn't bear to think that Helen hated me, or that I got what I deserved. Instead I believed what the tabloids said—I was a victim, but a mind-reader—and when it was time to find my life's work, I set out to prove that some good would come out of my past. I would read people's minds, not to save myself, but to save them from themselves.

How could I have known that was impossible? That instead I would only humiliate them? That I would be punished, that I would meet Axel? That then Axel would meet his killers?

How could Helen have known all that, how could she have known what she was setting into motion that night when she opened the door?

"Q"

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LAURA GUTH
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR, SUBSCRIPTIONS

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DETECTIVERSE

ESCAPE ROUTES

by ELIZABETH L. HAWN

When Grandpa got twenty-to-life,
He enlisted the aid of his wife.
He said, "Won't you try
To bring me a pie
Containing a file or a knife?"

When Dad was sent to the pen,
He served only one year of ten.
Getting out wasn't hard—
Mom bribed a guard—
And Dad was a free man again.

Now that son Johnny's in jail,
He hopes New Age methods won't fail:
"Through deep meditation,
I'll achieve levitation
And over the walls I will sail."

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If Barry Grissom rescued anything, there would be an angle in it, Pat thought. If Robbie Dell dashed into a burning stable, it would be without calculating risk or reward. He would brave the flames out of empathy for another creature's suffering . . .

THE SUBSTITUTE

by JOHN C. BOLAND

The trucks from the rural fire-protection district were already gone when I got to George Dell's farm. The main stable hadn't been touched, but the old wooden auxiliary building nearest the driveway was blackened above the double doors.

I parked under a shade tree and climbed out with my little black bag. This wasn't how I'd planned to spend my sixtieth birthday. But I had built my practice by being on call to anyone in the county any day, any hour. It gave me an excuse to skip weddings and funerals.

Charlie Amberson came across the stable yard, uniformed belly bouncing. He was giving instructions of some sort to Robbie Dell, the owner's son, who lumbered along on a deformed left foot.

"Hello, Pat," Amberson called to me. "George Dell and most of the hands are away. I told the boy to get him on the phone. Go on, get going, son."

He watched with a critical air as the youth stumbled off toward the house. Charlie Amberson had two boys of his own, one of whom had joined the police force down in Salisbury. I guess he couldn't look at Robbie Dell without feeling that he and his wife had been spared.

I smiled at the deputy. "Let's see the damage."

"Sure. Only four animals were in the building. The kid got two out okay," he said with an astonishment he didn't bother to hide. "One of the others got banged up some. And the last one was burned pretty bad."

"What about the burned one?"

He patted the holster at his hip. "There was no use in waiting. Though I wish we'd tracked you down sooner."

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The answering service had pulled me in from my daughter's back yard. It was a long drive down the peninsula on not very good roads jammed with Saturday dawdlers.

"Want to see the hurt one?" Charlie asked.

Piles of wet, blackened hay were still steaming, raked well clear of the buildings, as I followed him down the yard. The horses that hadn't been injured paced in agitation in a corral on the far side of the driveway. It looked like George Dell had been lucky. If the fire had been in the newer stable where he kept the best of his own animals plus several he was training for other owners, the loss could have been disastrous.

They had moved the injured horse, a big bay gelding, into the main building. An hour after the blaze, he was still easily spooked. I reached into the stall and patted him cautiously, then stepped past the gate and looked him over. He shied away, standing gingerly on three legs.

"I wasn't sure about him," Charlie said.

I was. The left rear leg was broken in at least two places. A trickle of blood slid from a bone splinter showing through the skin. I stroked his nose. He wasn't a particularly memorable animal, but I recognized him as Lucky Dad, a three-year-old who hadn't lived up to his name.

This was his second season, and he had finally begun showing the bursts of courage and style that his blood lines had led racegoers to expect last year. Leo Hanrahan, my neighbor, had dropped ten dollars a few weeks ago when Lucky Dad zipped home a half length ahead of the favorite. Lucky Dad had been a 15-to-1 shot. If he still had a following at the betting window, they had done well off people like Leo.

I dug a humane killer, a vial of pomlethol, out of my bag.

"I'm going to have to clear this with somebody," I said.

Charlie shook his grey-stubbled head. "Good luck. The kid says they're over at Warenton Downs."

The track was staging what counts in the mid-Atlantic region as a big weekend. It was on the far side of Baltimore, a few miles outside Washington. A lot of congested roads lay between there and the Delmarva farm. If George Dell had entries at Warenton, he wouldn't be back before dark.

I couldn't see letting Lucky Dad wait that long, so I went up to the house and found Robbie. He was a big kid, with a broad face

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that hadn't taken the shape of an adult's yet. Perhaps it never would. He was on the phone, trying to raise his father at the track. Not the brightest kid in the world, he wore the troubled expression I'd seen so often, as if he wasn't sure whether he would suffer more from taking a problem to Dad or letting it ride.

From what I'd seen, George Dell, shamed at having sired an imperfect offspring, kept the boy aware of his shortcomings. I made a point of neither liking George nor disliking him, figuring an animal doctor who went picking and choosing his human clientele wasn't being fair to the beasts.

After a moment, Robbie slammed down the phone in frustration, then gave me an embarrassed look. I told him what needed to be done. He sucked his lips. "Are you sure it can't wait?" he said.

"I don't think Lucky Dad would want to wait."

He agonized, then caught me watching and waved his heavy arm at the door. "Okay, do it."

I put down the bay, then let Charlie Amberson lead me around behind the scorched stable. As I inspected the carcass of the animal he had shot, the deputy said, "Its name was Big House. He was too wild to control. That dumb kid was about to get hurt trying." Which meant, I gathered, that Charlie hadn't waited for permission to kill the horse. A deputy sheriff had wider latitude than a veterinarian, even apart from not worrying about losing the Dells' business. A glance at the blistered flanks of Big House was enough. I told Charlie he had done the right thing.

I transcribed the registration numbers tattooed inside the two dead animals' mouths to my notebook, collected my bag, and drove back to town.

A couple of times that afternoon I caught myself thinking about Robbie. The fire had started in the stable's wiring about midmorning. Alone on the farm, apart from an ancient groom, Robbie had been as much of a hero as he was able. Two horses were dead, but he had saved two others. I wondered whether his father would credit the successes.

Or the veterinarian's judgment, which worried me.

He came by that evening. I heard knocking and a frenzy of barking from the kennels.

Husky, tanned, with wavy white hair, George took up most of the doorway. He was in his early fifties, solid and prosperous, with a

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confidence that people seem to be born with. He wore a leather-trimmed hacking jacket, khakis, and gum-soled boots. "We just got back from the Downs or I'd have thanked you earlier," he said.

I swallowed my surprise, which meant swallowing most of the explanations I had ready. He must have gotten kicked in the head this afternoon. Not for a moment had I doubted George Dell's reaction to losing Big House and Lucky Dad. He would demand details and finally decree that a better solution could have been found. I nodded. "It was a bad break," I said.

"I trust your judgment, Pat. Besides, I saw it myself."

He nettled me. "I meant it's a bad break losing two horses. Big House, especially."

"He was a hard worker." George squinted at me in the porch light.

"Do you want some coffee?" I backed away a step, a half hearted invitation.

"No, it's late. I just stopped by to say thanks for coming out."

At the foot of the stairway, a young man leaned against Dell's pickup truck. I recognized Barry Grissom, who had charge of caring for the Dell Farm's horses. I'd run into him at a couple of auction sales, a quick-witted kid from Baltimore or Wilmington or someplace. He was learning the horse business fast.

George followed my glance and smiled. His son stayed home and Barry went calling. It couldn't have been plainer. "C'mon up here. You know Doctor Walthers."

Barry came up the wooden stairs in a half dozen bounds. He was lanky and easy-moving, with short blond hair, wide-set blue eyes, a small mouth that seemed on the verge of a grin. He wore a light denim jacket with the cuffs turned back, a plaid shirt, grey slacks. "Doc," he said, nodding and offering a hand.

"How are you, Barry?"

George slapped his shoulder. "He's comin' along real good. Already knows which end of a horse you put the feed bag on."

It was a boss's joke, and Barry grinned. "It only took two years."

I wondered, without knowing why, what he thought his position would be in another two years. His wrist bore a gold watch that looked like a month's current pay, and that suggested either optimism about the future or indifference to it.

"Tomorrow I ought to check the wiring in the rest of the buildings," Barry said to the older man. He ground his knuckles into a palm. "I wish I'd been there this morning. I could have gotten 'em all out safe. Just would've had to move fast."

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"We weren't that lucky," George said.

"Lucky Dad seemed to have started coming into his own," I said, realizing that I was deliberately rubbing salt into George's wound.

He sighed. "Yeah. That was bad all around."

His voice was so flat that I felt a stab of contrition. "I checked their registration numbers, so I can confirm the loss for insurance. Just mail me the forms."

He nodded. "I figured you'd have done that. Good night, Pat."

They left and I went back upstairs. I had forgotten to ask how he'd made out at Warenton. The Sunday newspaper editions we got over here closed too early to carry the race results. Well, I would read about it Monday, if I still cared.

I spent Sunday with Julie and her kids, who were inheriting Grandpop's weakness for strays. Masha said animal doctors would be needed on the moon, where she planned to settle. When she and the rest of the brood splashed in the pool, I kept a safe distance and let my mind wander, not very productively, back to George Dell's two sons, the one he had and the one he wished he'd had. A slightly botched biological product versus a fit and healthy specimen.

My preference struck me as odd. I hadn't known Barry Grissom as a child, but I couldn't imagine him bicycling into town, bringing a pet rabbit with a hurt leg for Doc Walthers to splint. I had another suspicion. It seemed unfair to imagine him injuring an animal for pleasure, especially without evidence, but at a certain age you begin to accept things you can't prove. If Barry rescued anything, I thought, there would be an angle in it—like impressing George. If Robbie dashed into a burning stable, it would be without calculating risk or reward. He would brave the flames out of empathy for another creature's suffering.

When I got back to my house, the upstairs door was broken and the office had been ransacked. The medicine cabinet was open. So were the drawers of my desk.

I put down my bag and listened for any creak or clatter to indicate that my guest hadn't left. When it stayed quiet for five minutes, I went and checked the living quarters. Things had been disturbed, drawers stirred, but with care. If living alone hadn't made me fussily tidy, I might not even have noticed the search.

I went back to the office. From the medicine cabinet, a few vials of non-toxic—and non-narcotic—drugs were missing. By law I had to report the theft, but nobody would get excited.

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As I reached for the phone, it rang.

Barry Grissom sounded less self-assured than usual. "One of the horses we ran yesterday is real sick," he said. "Got the shakes, chills. Mr. Dell says if he didn't know better—" he broke off "—he'd say it was anthrax."

If somebody says anthrax, even on a Sunday night, you put your hat back on. I turned off the light and closed the broken door.

Barry met me at the top of the driveway, wearing corduroys and a sweatshirt against the evening chill. He climbed into my Ford. "All the way down to the stables, Doc."

There were lights on in the house as we passed, and one dim light in the main stable, where George Dell stood in the doorway. They took me into the stable. Half a dozen of the stalls had occupants. I glanced over each animal.

"The one on the right," Barry said.

I put down my bag, folded my arms over the top of the door. Patting a flank got me a half attentive snort. "He seems okay now," I said.

"Familiar, even?" Barry said.

I ignored him. "Tell me about the symptoms," I asked George.

He lowered his head without answering.

"We had a sick horse," Barry said. "You put him down, remember?"

I looked at George, who was pretending to be someplace else.

"I don't know what this is about, but you're going to get a bill," I said. I picked up my bag and started for the door.

The knife in the boy's hand stopped me.

George looked sick.

"There would be a problem tomorrow, Doc," Barry said. "The newspapers are going to say that Lucky Dad won the fourth race yesterday at Warenton Downs. Turn around and look at him. Pretty healthy for having a broken leg, huh?"

It took me a minute to get it. Having a knife pointed at you jumbles synapses. The horse beside me was a big bay, not very memorable. Like the big bay I had put down with a lethal injection yesterday.

"You had a lookalike run the race," I said to George.

"That's almost right," the boy answered. "Lucky Dad ran the race. You killed the lookalike. He's the one we ran most of last year and a few times this season. No power, no spirit. Didn't you wonder why a horse with Lucky Dad's blood lines ran so lousy?"

I had, of course. And thought the horse must have been a disap-

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pointment to George—as well as to bettors who liked his ancestry. This season he'd been a long-shot, and the wins had looked like flukes. If he kept winning, Lucky Dad would have been explained as a late bloomer.

"So you made money when he lost," I said, "and now you make it when he wins."

Barry nodded proudly.

"Who was the ringer's sire?" I asked.

"That doesn't matter." George cleared his throat. "An acquaintance came up with him."

"I got friends in Baltimore," Barry boasted. "They like to improve the odds when they bet."

I thought about it. "You never let the same jockey near both horses."

"Right. Nobody else could tell them apart."

Unless a question was raised. Then the tape measure would disclose small but damning differences. Even if the lookalike's carcass was destroyed, the registration number in my notebook would be incriminating.

"So do you plan to stab me?" I said, moving for the door.

They were both strong, and George was big. Wrestled to the floor, my back in the straw, George sitting astride my chest, I didn't have much say when Barry tied my hands and ankles. He pulled the knots tight and they propped me in an empty stall, tethered like an unruly colt to the frame.

Barry patted my pockets, then went through my bag. He found the notebook, pocketed it, and they went away.

I tugged at the ropes. The real Lucky Dad looked over his shoulder, then nodded and ignored me. I could hear the clatter of my old Ford's hood being raised, murmuring voices, Barry's thoughtful suggestions. Whatever they had in mind would be reasonably competent and lethal. Maybe a pint of whiskey and a ride into Grayson's Quarry. Not convincing, but as plausible as any alternative theory that Deputy Charlie Amberson was apt to dream up.

If George Dell had been long on reason, he wouldn't have risked so much—his right to train and race, his farm—by putting in a ringer.

Sixty was a ripe old age—so I told myself. It couldn't matter too much if life stopped here. No family was dependent on me as a breadwinner or sage adviser. No friends couldn't get along without

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Pat's bawdy jokes and political gripes. There wouldn't be a lot to regret—except that I wasn't ready. I hadn't even trained an assistant to take over the practice.

Sitting there bound, I pitied George Dell. His substitute son's scheme ultimately would benefit Barry most, getting him close to the city specialists in long chances.

Barry came back and prowled through my bag. He returned the notebook, minus the page with the embarrassing registration number.

"Charlie Amberson was out here, too," I reminded him. "I told him it was Lucky Dad I destroyed."

"So you made a mistake. Lucky Dad's right here. That fat cop don't know one horse from another."

As George Dell came back in, I said, "Do you mind telling me what stupid thing you're planning?"

George shook his head.

"An accident is too clumsy," Barry piped up. "Too convenient. It might raise questions. But a robbery at your office? I already made a mess looking for your notebook." As he talked, he continued to ferret through bottles and instruments. Coming up with a 100-cc. vial of dark glass, he frowned at the label. "Pomlethol. I knew I'd remember the name if I seen it. They kill horses with it. I bet it's what he used on Unlucky Dad."

George lurched forward and tore the vial from the boy's fingers, his face contorted with rage. "You mean to shoot him up with this?"

"Have we got a choice, Mr. Dell?"

George subsided. He didn't look at either of us. Decisions were being forced on him. He handed the bottle back. "What is it?"

Barry read the label aloud. "Concentrated sodium pentobarbital. I know this stuff. They use it in Nembutal. Say a junkie breaks into Doc's office, looking for dope like this. He gets caught, gives the old boy a needleful, and Doc goes to sleep for good."

He went back and pillaged my bag some more. The plastic-capped syringe that came out was twice the size of anything found in a general practitioner's office. It was a twin of the one I'd used on Lucky Dad's surrogate.

He checked the big watch on his skinny wrist. "So we just wait a few hours, Doc. Till we're sure everyone in your neighborhood is fast asleep."

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George left quickly. Barry hung around a few minutes, looking at me contemplatively, before he left.

Not the type to bring a hurt pet for fixing.

"They're going to kill you."

I craned around and rested a shoulder on the side of the stall.

"You don't have to answer. I was listening." Robbie lurched forward, pulling a knife—a fat Boy Scout model—from a hip pocket. His clumsy fingers distinguished between rope and stiff tendons. The knife worried through the rope.

He had just cut my feet free and I was up when Barry burst through the door, running so hard he almost fell, an old double-barreled shotgun in one hand. George arrived on his heels.

"Look what your dummy's done!" Barry shouted. He came at me, his narrow face congested. "I'm going to finish this right now!"

Robbie stood in Barry's way, and as the gun barrel swung up my heart stumbled. As the muzzle swept past him and Barry tried to slip around the bulkier youth, Robbie swung his fist from over his shoulder and down. The knuckles and hard flesh caught Barry on the side of the head like a horse's kick, throwing him against the door of a stall. The gate burst inward, and the boy sprawled into the straw, out cold, the shotgun beside him.

George stared at the shotgun. I looked hard at him. "Let it go. You don't want your son to see you do that."

The man's anger burst out. "God damn it! He wouldn't understand if he saw!"

I picked up my bag. "You've got about a half hour to think of an explanation for Charlie Amberson. Unless you want to grab the shotgun and come kill me."

His face hung in long lines of exhaustion. He shook his head.

I said, "Keep Barry on a leash. Nothing he tries will do you any good." I collected the shotgun, just in case, and edged past George. As I reached the door, he was on one knee in the stall, whispering Barry's name while Robbie watched.

He caught up with me at the car. "I did you a favor, Doctor Walthers. Didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, Robbie. Thank you."

He swallowed, then poured it out in a rush. "So you owe me one! I work good—and I'm not as dumb as some people think. I want a job away from here!"

I hired him, of course.

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"Perhaps you should get away from mysteries and detective stories for a while," Alice said as John followed her into the kitchen. "They've become almost an obsession, you know . . ."

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT

by JAMES SALLIS

Bob and Marge live in the house behind us, across the alley. They are incredibly in love and have been for fifteen years. Twenty minutes ago I heard gunfire from their house—a single, cracking shot, perhaps a .38.

Alice's eyes briefly lifted—other times I might not have noticed, but we'd just quarreled again and I was, as usual following these quarrels, especially sensitive to her moods—then returned to her magazine. A *Redbook,* I think.

I sat staring at the word "missing" on page 84 of a Raymond Chandler novel for some time before I spoke.

"Did you hear something, dear?"

"Hear something?" She watched me over the half lens of her reading glasses.

"Yes. Just now."

"Such as?" Eyes moving back to the magazine. Its cover bore the legend "How To Tell If He Loves You: Five Questions You Can Ask."

"I don't know, really. A slammed door? Backfire? A gunshot, maybe."

Her eyes quickly took in the cover of my book and went back to her own reading. "I heard nothing, John—at least that I can recall."

"The curious incident of the dog in the nighttime."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, dear. Just something from the Holmes stories."

Alice put her magazine on the end table and asked if I'd like a nightcap.

"Perhaps you should get away from mysteries and detective stories for a while," she said as I followed her into the kitchen. "They've become almost an obsession, you know. We could pick up some nice

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science fiction at the library. Historical novels, romances, biographies."

"I guess so."

She handed over a brandy and soda and I sipped at it. "But detection's what I really like," I said. "I've tried to explain why—how the truth gradually comes to light, piece by piece, through layers of misdirection and camouflage. Like a worm fighting its way to the surface after hard rain."

"Yes, John, I know." Hers was Irish coffee, and she blew once across it, eyeglasses fogging. "But there comes a time one wonders." She folded the glasses and laid them on the counter by a spoon rest. Released from bondage, her eyes became astonishingly blue and reactive. She sipped at the coffee.

"Last Thursday after we'd eaten at Scobbo's," she said, "when that drunk fell asleep on the bus. You insisted he'd been assassinated."

"Humor, Alice. I was feeling good from the food and the wine. It was our anniversary. I thought it would make you laugh."

"And all that talk about the teacher who disappeared at the high school. What do you think the kids make of all that? They have to repeat it, you know, all that talk about plots and conspiracies."

"I guess so, dear. I understand, and I'll be careful what I say. Just don't make me read any romances—please."

We took our drinks back into the living room, where I sat looking at the word "clues" (page 85) and remembering times I'd come home recently and found Alice and Marge huddled together over coffee in the kitchen, remembering their low voices and sudden, guarded looks. Once I'd asked if Bob and Marge could be having problems. The usual misunderstandings and squabbles, I guess, Alice had said—they were inevitable.

We have closed our book and magazine and are about to go up to bed when the second shot sounds, slicing into the night's silence. For some reason Shawna's face comes to me—she is thirteen and Bob's delight, a quiet, gentle girl. Neither of us moves. Clearing my throat at last, I stand.

"I wouldn't go over there just now," Alice says.

I sink back into my chair. Outside there is a silence like stone.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Athalia Goode story by

RALEIGH BOND

The shelves of Dan Barclay's library were lined with books. Glass cases on the walls displayed every kind of western memorabilia. "Everything from Geronimo's peacepipe to Wyatt Earp's belt buckle," Barclay proclaimed proudly. He motioned to Jess to open a case and his son produced a set of keys from his pocket. Barclay withdrew a large Nineteenth Century revolver and waved it. "This was used by Cole Younger at Northfield."

"You mean fighting a battle?" asked Athalia.

Barclay laughed heartily and winked at Byron. "No, ma'am. Holding up a bank . . ."

THE BARCLAY BOYS

by RALEIGH BOND

Even Athalia was acting like a kid about it. Although we didn't spend our childhood together, we both remembered a glorious period of Saturday matinees where we sat in our local movie house enthralled by the adventures of "The Prince of Pistoleers," Dan Barclay, and his wonder horse Blaze.

Blaze had long ago gone to the taxidermist, but the endurable Barclay was not only alive and well but living on his estate south of Los Angeles, a few miles from us. The reason I knew this was because my agent called to tell me he was looking for a writer to help him compose a book on American Western History and wanted to talk to me about the assignment after reading some of my writings.

My agent said the invitation of a weekend stay at Barclay's place included "the little woman" as well. Athalia chose to ignore this because she wanted to meet her childhood hero. "The little woman"

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was even willing to take time from a complicated embezzlement case she was working on to journey down to Barclay's estate with me that Saturday morning.

We arrived around noon and found it to be just as described. It was located in the desert, miles from the nearest town, and looked like a miniature movie set of old, when epics like *Dodge City* and *My Darling Clementine* flooded the movie theaters. There was a large luxurious ranchhouse next to mock-ups of a saloon, a general store, and a rustic corral. In the clearing they formed, two men in cowboy garb were treading carefully toward one another in the best final-gundown tradition. The younger of the two reached swiftly for the revolver in his holster, but the older man was quicker, drawing and firing his weapon before the other man cleared leather. Athalia and I stood aghast as the younger man fell forward onto the ground and lay spread-eagled in the dust.

Then he got up again.

"I've told you a hundred times to keep your eyes steady!" said the older man sternly, in a familiar voice that brought back the taste of popcorn in the dark. "I could see you make the decision to draw even before your hand moved."

A more cultivated and restrained voice sounded from someone behind us. "I think your visitors have arrived, Pa."

The older man looked in our direction, grinned, and came forward with a bold, springy stride that belied his sixty-odd years. Dan Barclay had hardly a line on his face and his body rippled with muscle as he stuck out a heavy, warm hand.

"You must be Byron Goode," he said, and then added unnecessarily, "I'm Dan Barclay."

I introduced Athalia, who got a quick and approving appraisal. "They tell me you're a private detective, ma'am. And a damned good one. Pleased to meet you."

"*I'm* pleased to meet the idol of my lost youth, Mr. Barclay," Athalia said.

"Name's Dan." He turned to the younger man he had just gunned down. "This is Jess, one of my worthless sons." Jess laughed obediently and nodded to us. He was a few inches shorter than his father, heavy and slow of movement, with a slightly dissipated look in his blinking blue eyes. "And that dude over by the tree," said Barclay, "is my youngest, Billy."

A thin man in his late twenties wearing an eastern suit ambled over and gave us a toothy grin. "How do you do," he said with casual

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courtesy. His voice, which had announced our presence, contained not a trace of the western accent that characterized his father and brother.

"Let's go into the house. I want you to see my collection," said Barclay, steering us toward a set of French doors that bypassed the front and back entrances of the ranchhouse and deposited us directly in the library.

The shelves were lined with books. Glass cases on the walls displayed every kind of western memorabilia. "Everything from Geronimo's peacepipe to Wyatt Earp's belt buckle," Barclay proclaimed proudly. He motioned to Jess to open a case and his son produced a set of keys from his pocket. Barclay withdrew a large Nineteenth Century revolver and waved it in our direction. "This was used by Cole Younger at Northfield."

"You mean fighting a battle?" asked Athalia.

Barclay laughed heartily and winked at me. "No, ma'am. Holding up a bank."

Satisfied that Athalia's accomplishments didn't include a knowledge of western history, he set the gun carelessly back on its pegs and motioned for Jess to lock the case up again. Before he did, Jess reached in and straightened the gun.

"The boy's a stickler for neatness," his father explained, as if asking our pardon. "Anyway, these are some of the things I want to put in my book. But we'll talk about that later. I got an end-all barbecue planned for you both tonight, and you'll want to rest up for it. Maria will show you to your room."

He spoke in rapid Spanish to a large elderly Mexican woman who had just come in. She answered him in same.

Barclay turned to me. "But before you go, I want you to autograph one of your books. It's the one on Butch Cassidy. I picked it up in Mexico City some years ago." He handed me a book with a lurid, multi-colored jacket that I didn't recognize until I realized it was a Spanish publication of my work. Only my name was legible to me. "Make it out to Maria," he urged, smiling at the Mexican woman. "She's a big fan of yours, but this is the only way she can read your stuff."

Athalia smiled wickedly as I got out my pen and nodded to Maria. "I always did think they lost something in their English translation," she said.

Barclay's "end-all" barbecue that night got us a chance to meet

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Delia Carter, the heroine in all his old westerns. Time had also been good to her, and she still looked very much like the fetching cowgirl who was always at Barclay's side when he rode off into the sunset. Surprisingly, she was a guest and not a regular in the household.

"I always thought you two were married," Athalia told her as we stood on the veranda waiting for the festivities to begin.

"'Fraid not, honey," the lovely sixty-year-old woman told us. "We've thought of getting hitched, but Dan feels his sons would resent someone taking their mother's place." There was a tone of bitterness in her voice. "Sarah died when they were still youngins and Dan went all out to raise them properly. I just wish they'd turned out better for his sake."

She waved her hand toward the youngest son, who had gone out into the yard, looking uncomfortable in the levis and plaid shirt Barclay was having us wear. "Take Billy there. When he was little, Dan sent him East to all the big schools, but he just learned how to waste his life. He only comes home for a few days at a time to pick up some money and take off again." She looked toward the barbecue spit, where Jess stood jabbering and supervising the cooking, much to the displeasure of Maria. "Jess ain't much better. He keeps hanging around like a vulture, waiting to get his share of the inheritance. As for Jim—"

"Jim?" I asked.

"He's the oldest. You haven't met him because he doesn't come here any more." Her voice lowered darkly. "Let's hope you never do."

Barclay came out and took command then, wearing a buckskin outfit studded with rhinestones and dazzling us all with his energy and high spirits. Throughout the meal he sat at the head of the table, regaling us with western and movie stories. At the height of the hilarity, Maria suddenly appeared at his side and spoke to him. He looked startled and upset and muttered haltingly as he rose, "Excuse me. I—I've got to see someone in the library."

After he went in through the French doors, Billy turned to Jess in puzzlement. "What's that all about?"

"Jim's here," Jess told him grimly, reaching for the tequila bottle.

Twenty minutes later, he was drunk. The rest of us waited for Barclay's return, but he remained in the house. Finally, Delia rose and suggested we call it a night. Awkwardly we rose from the table, Jess supported by Billy, and went inside.

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As we entered the house, we saw Barclay at the library door, looking troubled. "What's wrong, Dan?" Delia asked in concern.

"Nothing, Delia." He turned to us and forced a smile. "What say we take a little ride tomorrow? The view up by Indian Point is magnificent."

"We'd love to see it," I said hesitantly, feeling Athalia's hand slip into mine.

"Good. I'll have the horses saddled in the morning. See you at four." He gave a disapproving look at Jess's condition and sighed. "Delia, will you see Jess gets to bed?" Delia, assisting Billy with Jess, gave us a smile as she said good night.

Athalia and I stood a moment, suddenly alone in the hall, wondering if it was too late to make an excuse to head for home. Then a sharp, decisive voice said, "Excuse me. May I talk to you in here?"

Standing at the library door was a tall broad-shouldered man who looked startlingly like Dan Barclay of old. He was dressed in a three-piece western suit and looked at us with the same air of command we associated with Barclay, only his had an added element of arrogance about it. There was no doubt he was Jim Barclay.

Inside the library, he walked over to the desk where a number of legal papers were spread and sat down, not inviting us to find chairs.

"My father told me you're an author, Mr. Goode," he said. He turned to Athalia with a slightly amused expression. "And you, Mrs. Goode, are a private investigator. In other words, you're both professional observers. I'd appreciate your opinion of my father."

"I don't understand," I told him.

He sighed and went on, as if explaining the obvious. "This childish preoccupation of his with the Wild West, the mock gunfights, the exhibits. Don't they strike you as peculiar?"

I exchanged a look with Athalia, both of us uncomfortable. "Different, perhaps," I said.

He frowned. "My father is a sick man who needs medical attention." He indicated the papers. "These are affidavits of those who have come in contact with him and agree with me. I'm going to file them in court tomorrow morning."

"And who would run his estate while he's being—helped, Mr. Barclay?" Athalia asked.

"His nearest relative," he told her blandly.

Athalia beat me to a reply. "As far as I'm concerned, Dan Barclay is the same man I adored on the screen," she said. I held out my

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arm and she took it, and we left Jim Barclay sitting in silent rage as we swept out and up the stairs to our room.

It was ten minutes before four when we were aroused by the sound of Maria shouting as she raced up the stairs. I figured it was Dan's way of waking the troops and tried to hide under the covers, but then I realized her voice was filled with horror.

When Athalia and I dashed out onto the landing, Maria was talking excitedly to Jess. Billy stood nearby, looking at his older brother wonderingly until Jess turned to him and translated, "She says the library. Come on."

As the two of them sped down the stairs, Maria saw that Delia had just come out of her room and she went to her, wailing hysterically in her arms. Athalia and I followed the others down into the library. Jim Barclay sat at the same desk where we had left him last night—with a bullet hole in his head.

"Call the police," Jess barked at Billy. "Use the phone in the hall." The stunned young man rushed out. As Athalia approached the desk, Jess told her, "Better not touch anything."

"The entry's in the back of his head," I said, having got around by the French doors behind the desk.

Athalia nodded. "The blood spattered onto the desk." I looked, and was surprised to see that the papers that had been there the night before were gone and in their place were four playing cards, spread out as if for a game of solitaire—the ace of clubs, the eight of hearts, the eight of spades, and the ace of diamonds.

Just then the French doors opened and Dan Barclay came in, fully dressed and smiling at us expectantly. "Morning, folks. Aren't you dressed for our ride?"

His face went white as he saw Jim's body. Then he suddenly looked up at one of the walls as if a horrible thought had occurred to him. His massive figure seemed to shrink and he turned and went back outside.

Henry T. Masterson was the sheriff of the county. The citizens called him Bat, of course, and he'd had more than enough kidding about it. He was a short, thick-set man in his fifties. At first he was more intrigued by the fact that Athalia and I were the last people to see Jim alive, other than his murderer, than by the fact Athalia was herself an investigator. It wasn't until we were alone in the library after the body had been taken away and the room had been

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brushed for prints that he began to talk to her like a colleague. His stock with me went straight up.

"I figure," he began, "the murderer stood behind those drapes."

"That's what I figure, too," Athalia said.

His shaggy eyebrows went up. "Why?"

"The position of the wound," she answered. "And there are powder-marks on the draperies."

His face split into a grin. "The coroner says it occurred last night about ten or eleven. Nobody'd hear the shot in the house. The room's soundproof."

"Did you find any papers on or near the desk?"

"No."

Athalia explained how Jim had come there last night with affidavits and asked our help in declaring his father insane. Masterson scratched his rough cheek and pointed at the desk. "All we found was those cards. He must've been playing solitaire when he was shot."

"Why would he stop to play solitaire? I had the impression he was about to leave."

"I don't know. But there are the cards."

"And there are the bloodstains." Athalia picked up one of the playing cards and showed Masterson its clean surface. "If he was playing cards when he was killed, they should be spattered with blood like the desk. But they're not. And there are some bloodstains under the cards."

"You mean somebody set them up after he was dead?"

"And maybe gathered up the papers and took them with him."

Masterson and the police left that afternoon, making it plain none of us were to leave the premises without their permission. It was a quiet, morbid lunch. Barclay stayed in his room and Delia was left to run things. After lunch, Athalia and I went to our room to rest. I had a theory forming in my head that was too incredible to share with Athalia.

Around four o'clock, we went back downstairs to the library. The room seemed to have been tidied up. The first thing that struck us both as we entered was that the case on the wall opposite the French doors where the gun used by Cole Younger had once rested was empty. My gaze shifted over to another wall where a picture hung crooked. Below it was a footstool, and in front of that, flat on his

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back, with his feet facing the wall and a gun wound in his head was Jess Barclay. He was dead.

The doorbell rang.

We stood there and heard Delia answer it, admitting Sheriff Masterson and apologizing for Maria's absence—the Mexican woman had been in a state of horror ever since she'd found Jim's body. Masterson had spent the afternoon searching the countryside for signs or word of an outsider but had come up empty. Now he wanted to check out the library again. Delia told him to go right in and her footsteps sounded back toward the kitchen.

The library door opened and Masterson walked in on us. Athalia pointed down at Jess's body. "We just found him," she whispered.

"Same room. Same wound—from behind," muttered the sheriff in frustration. Then he looked hopeful. "Has the family been together all this time?"

"No. They went their separate ways right after you left," I said.

Athalia addressed Masterson. "There *is* a difference."

He looked up at her.

"No cards," she said.

"That's right. And instead of sitting at a desk, it looks like he was standing facing a bare wall."

"Not entirely bare. There's the crooked picture hanging there. And the footstool on the floor. Jess was a very fastidious man. His father told us that."

"You mean he might have been standing on the stool straightening the picture when he was shot?"

Athalia nodded. "The murderer could even have slanted it beforehand, and then pointed it out to him to put him off his guard."

I put my two cents in. "Yes, it might be part of a pattern."

Both of them gazed at me wonderingly.

"Pattern?" asked Masterson.

It took me a while to explain the idea that had come to me after the first death. To tell the truth, finding Jess murdered was almost something I expected. The sheriff seemed to grow more and more interested in what I was saying. Athalia said nothing.

Masterson called for scene-of-the-crime help, chose a small living room next to the library for what came next, and sent for Delia.

"Sheriff, what is it?" she asked. "Did you find something new?"

"Well, I came back because the ballistics report on the bullet that killed Jim came through and I wanted to see which of those antique

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guns in the library was missing." Delia looked at him with alarm, but just then we heard someone pass the doorway. Masterson rushed out and found Billy, down from upstairs, yawning and stretching. "Billy, come in here, will you?" he said in a low but urgent tone.

Billy stepped inside, blinking sleepily. Masterson closed the door behind him. "This concerns your personal safety, boy," he said, indicating that he and Delia should sit down. Billy looked alarmed. "Brace yourself for a shock. Jess has been killed."

Billy seemed to shrink inside himself. "Oh, no!" cried Delia. "I didn't hear any shot!"

Masterson looked at her. "I didn't say he'd been shot, Miss Carter."

"Well, I thought—after what happened to Jim—"

"As a matter of fact, he *was* shot. From behind, while he was straightening a picture." No one spoke for a moment. "Now I want to ask you a question." He turned to Billy. "What are the full names of you and your brothers?"

If he wanted to completely confuse them, he couldn't have chosen a better question. For a moment Billy stared at him, and then he shrugged and answered with some disgust. "It was one of Pa's little games. James Butler Barclay, Jesse Woodson Barclay, and William H. Barclay."

Masterson nodded. "The first and middle names—in your case, middle initial—of Wild Bill Hickok, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid." He paused for the reaction. There was none. He went on. "Hickok was shot from behind while playing cards. His hand included two aces and two eights—known thereafter as a dead man's hand. Jesse James was also shot from behind, by one of his own gang while straightening a picture on the wall."

"But this is insane!" Delia said.

"Yes, ma'am, it is. Who among all of you would know these facts? Who might use them in such an eccentric manner? Jim was trying to get Dan committed, which is a good enough motive for murder, especially for a real madman."

"Dan isn't crazy! And why would he kill Jess?"

"For the same reason. If one son would try it, why not the other? Maybe they were working together. How about you, Billy? Did either of them ever discuss your father's mental state with you?"

Billy appeared to have trouble finding his voice. The sheriff bent over his chair, taking his two arms in his hands. "I told you this concerns your personal safety, son. Don't forget that Billy the Kid was shot, too. That's all it takes to complete the pattern."

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"Pa wouldn't kill me," Billy managed.

"He might if he thought you were going to have him locked up in an insane asylum. If you know anything, you'd better open up or you could be next on the list."

"All right—Jim and Jess did talk to me about having him committed! But I wouldn't go along with them. Pa's not insane. I told him about it."

"You told him?" Masterson said. "Before Jim was killed? He knew Jess was in on it?"

"Yes."

"You told him Jess was in on it?"

"Yes, but—" Billy stopped and looked away, a growing fear reflected in his face. "Just now—"

We all regarded him silently. Masterson prodded him. "Just now what?"

"When I was coming down here, I passed Pa's room. I heard him and Maria inside. I didn't know about Jess then, but I thought I heard Pa mention his name. He was telling Maria to take something out to the phony saloon in the yard. Then she came out carrying a bundle. When Pa caught sight of me standing there, he looked—" He finished with a shudder, his face contorted in fear. Masterson headed for the door.

"Come on."

The interior of the saloon was fashioned after the Long Branch of Dodge City or the Oriental of Tombstone, with a fake crystal chandelier, a long clear mirror behind the bar, and a number of gambling tables. In back of the bar, we found a blanket, rolled up to hold Jim's bloodstained papers and the Cole Younger revolver. Two shots had recently been fired from its chambers.

Delia turned to Billy in rage. "You planted them there!"

"No, he didn't, Delia."

The sad but powerful voice drew our attention to the doorway. Dan Barclay was still dressed in the riding clothes he had worn in the morning, but now he seemed old and feeble. He stumbled into the room awkwardly.

"I had them put there," he told us.

"What were you doing with them?" asked Masterson.

Barclay sighed. "What does it look like?"

"I'll tell you what it looks like. It looks like you murdered your two sons and tried to hide the evidence."

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"I'll have to agree with you, Sheriff," Dan answered with a thin smile. "Tell me, what would you have done with sons like mine?"

Billy cut in, his voice filled with pain. "Pa, you—you would have killed me, too?"

Barclay cast a look at him, a look that reflected violent revulsion. "I'm sorry I didn't do it in the cradle."

Athalia and I were alone in the saloon. She kept looking at the empty doorway through which they had taken Barclay and I thought I read disappointment. I put my arm around her.

"You didn't have the background knowledge to solve this one, Athalia. I did."

She nodded, patting my hand. "You're right, Byron. What's important is that someone saw through this."

Back in the house, she had a few words with Masterson before they took Dan away into the night and then she joined me in the living room. I thought it was time we started to think of leaving, and I was all for going right away. Things were getting uglier. Billy was drinking heavily and muttering about what his father had said about wishing he'd killed him in the cradle when Delia shouted at him. "When were you ever a son to him? I've watched the three of you make him miserable for years!"

"And kept you from marrying him, right?" Billy snapped back at her. "That's what you really have against us! If it hadn't been for us, you'd be sitting pretty right now!"

It went on that way until Delia stormed upstairs and Billy sank into a stupor on the couch. I figured I'd call my agent in the morning to tell him the deal on the book appeared to be off, but right now I was wondering where Athalia and I should spend the night—when we heard a siren outside, followed by the screech of brakes and excited voices. Masterson burst through the front door before Delia made it down the stairs.

"Sheriff! What's happened?"

"Dan's escaped," he told her.

"What!" Billy was swaying in the living-room doorway.

"It happened just outside the property line," Masterson said. "We were fools to trust him without handcuffs. He grabbed a gun and bolted out of the car."

"You mean he's armed?" Billy shouted.

"Poor Dan," cried Delia. "You mustn't hurt him!"

"Miss Carter," Masterson told her roughly, "he's got a gun and

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he's dangerous. Now start locking this place up. My men and I will keep looking for him."

He turned toward the front door as Delia disappeared toward the back. Billy came forward and barred his way.

"Sheriff, you know what he means to do! He wants to kill me!"

"We don't know anything yet, Billy. If you're nervous, why don't you go upstairs and lock yourself in your room?" He rushed out and Billy set the bolt on the door behind him, then looked around like a trapped animal before starting for the stairs.

"Byron," Athalia said, "you told us how Mr. Hickok and Mr. James were killed. What were the circumstances surrounding the death of Billy the Kid?"

"He was shot by a sheriff—Pat Garrett."

"How?"

"It was night. Billy was going into the bedroom of a friend. He didn't know Garrett was already inside it."

Upstairs we could hear Billy reach the landing and start for his room.

"The room was dark," I went on, "but Garrett could see Billy in the doorway, standing in the moonlight."

There was a slight whine from the hinges as Billy opened his door overhead.

"That's when he shot him," I said.

The explosion reverberated down the stairs.

From the landing we could see Billy's open door and the darkened room within. I rushed in and snapped on the lights. Billy was sprawled motionless on the floor and a gentle breeze wafted through the room.

Suddenly Billy looked up, pointing. "He went out the window!"

Athalia rushed to the window and peered down. We could hear voices and running feet.

"He was waiting for me!" Billy cried. "He fired, but I ducked just in time!"

"Sheriff!" Athalia cried out the window.

"Right here, Mrs. Goode!"

"It's all over! You can come up now!" She closed the window and faced Billy and me, both of us staring at her in amazement. "It's no good, Billy. You went too far. You fired that bullet yourself to make us think your father tried to kill you. That would make the sheriff's

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men more likely to kill *him*. I'm sure a search of the room will turn up the gun you just used."

Billy was on his feet now and facing her with fury. To my relief, I heard Masterson and his men entering downstairs. "I don't know what you're talking about!" Billy shouted at Athalia.

"Yes, you do," she said. "I'm speaking English. It's Spanish you don't understand."

"Spanish?"

"Every time Maria has said something since we came here, you've had to wait until Jess translated it before you knew what she was saying. You weren't raised here with her, but back East. It's true you could have learned Spanish there. but it appears you didn't—and that proves you were lying when you said you heard Dan tell her to hide the gun and papers in the saloon. How could you understand what he was saying when he can speak to her only in Spanish?"

By this time Masterson was in the room, followed by two of his men. He gave Billy a hard look. "Well, Mrs. Goode, you were right, after all."

"Yes, Sheriff. Thanks for playing along with my little deception." Athalia turned back to Billy. "Dan never escaped, Billy. That was just something we needed you to believe to get you to tip your hand. It's true you were in on the plot with Jim and Jess to get your father declared insane, but that would have meant splitting the estate three ways. You had a better plan to get it all for yourself, using your father's fascination with western history to make it look as if he had killed your brothers. It almost worked."

It almost worked because I had swallowed it completely.

When the policemen took Billy out to the car, Masterson shook Athalia's hand. "One thing I don't understand yet, Mrs. Goode. Why did Dan let us think he was the murderer?"

"Dan has a code he's lived by all his life. And it says you don't let down a friend. When he saw that gun missing when he walked into the library this morning, he remembered that only Jess had a key."

"You mean he was protecting Jess? But—"

"No. He was protecting Delia. The last he'd seen of Jess was when Delia helped him to bed the night before. He thought she'd taken the key. He knew how much she hated his sons and he was afraid she might have killed Jim. Later, Billy planted the gun and papers in his father's room to be found once Jess's body was discovered. Dan found them first and thought Delia might have hidden them

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there. He called on Billy to help him by taking the things out to the saloon, thinking he could trust him. That's why he was so furious with him when he discovered us all there. He thought Billy had led the law there in order to implicate Delia."

I doubt if I'll ever get to write that book with Barclay. As soon as he could arrange it, he and Delia went to Europe on their honeymoon. We haven't heard a word from them since.

But we stayed over at the ranch one more day after the events described. Dan had Maria cook another end-all barbecue, and afterward he and Delia sang a dozen of the old western ballads they used to sing in their pictures. Dan said Athalia probably could have cleaned up Deadwood single-handedly. He was still strumming on his guitar when we got into the car toward dusk. Delia had her arm around him and the mock western town glistened palely in the dying light as Athalia and I rode off into the sunset.

DETECTIVERSE

STUCK UP

by GEORGE KOEHLER

There once was a teller named Bob,
Whose bank they continued to rob.
He said, with a smile,
That after a while
It gets to be part of the job.

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Aunt Sarah's eyes burned with fever. "Will God forgive me, Raphael? Will God forgive a murderess? The Torah says the Lord is good to all, even the wicked are judged mercifully, is it not so? If I repent, if I truly repent, God will receive me . . ."

A SABBATH FLAME

by RONALD LEVITSKY

Maybe because I couldn't find their birthplace on a map, I thought my family had no history, and therefore little connection to me. My grandparents came from some small town in what one year was Russia and the next Poland. Then there was the war, killing most of my relatives, names I never knew and faces I never had the chance to remember. Now from the old generation only my "Taunty," my Great Aunt Sarah and her husband Jacob survived. It was to their apartment I hurried that Friday afternoon in February after my law class finished.

My mother had telephoned the night before from her new home in Phoenix. "Taunty Sarah just called, talking crazy. Talking about dying and murder. I think she's very sick. She wanted to see you but didn't have your new number. Which tells me you haven't called her these past three months. Be a good boy—go over there tomorrow and let me know how she is. You were always special to her. Maybe she didn't show it, but you were the closest thing to the child she never had. She always said you were the spitting image of my father. You go there."

Amidst a swirl of snowflakes, I caught the El to the old neighborhood. I felt nauseous, not only because the heater was blowing too hot but because I would be expected to make bits of small talk between the long silences. My uncle would pat me on the shoulder, smile, and play his violin for me. Sometimes he reminisced about the elegant people he'd entertained nearly a half century before. My aunt, the one who supposedly loved me so much, would offer cake and stare silently at the rocking chair she had brought from the old country, a chair no one ever sat in. Raphael, they always called me, never Randy . . .

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I quickly zipped the jacket up to my chin while clanging down the stairs into the street. The wind pushed me past shops where voices spoke a cacophony of Asian tongues and odors stronger than the wind wafted from a hundred forbidden foods. Huddled in all of it was an old kosher butcher shop, hushed and alone. The customers, old women in babushkas and heavy three-button coats, shuffled home, clutching the handles of their shopping bags. I followed one of them into the tiny foyer of my aunt's apartment building and pressed a buzzer on the mailbox.

A voice crackled "Who's there?" My aunt's friend Bess.

"It's me, Randy. Raphael."

A pause, as if to remember, then: "Thank God, Raphael!"

I opened the buzzing door and climbed the steps to the second floor. Bess was waiting in the hallway, head cocked, motioning for me to hurry.

Inside the apartment, she led me directly into the bedroom, which was darkened by drawn curtains. Aunt Sarah lay in bed, her face haloed by a small lamp on the nighttable beside her. Her eyes were closed tightly, the skin drawn so taut across her cheekbones it seemed about to tear. Her lips moved silently as if in prayer. On the dresser and walls were dozens of photographs—of me and my sisters, our parents, and people whose faces bore a family resemblance but had died long ago on the other side of the world. This was my aunt's world, these photos and the rocking chair—which had been moved into the corner of the bedroom, barely discernible in the darkness.

"Taunty Sarah," I said, "how are you feeling?"

She seemed not to hear, and Bess said, "If only your grandfather was still alive, he would know what to do with this evil. He was a learned man, her brother—he could have been a rabbi, people said. That's why she wanted you to come. You have his name, Raphael, and you are studying the law as he did the Talmud. When she looks into your face, she sees him as a boy. That's why she wanted your mother to call you. Sit down, I go make tea."

"Where's Uncle Jacob?" I asked.

"Working. I made him go, poor man. Moping all day around the house, watching her. He should be home soon."

Shaking her head, mumbling something in Yiddish, she hurried from the room.

When I turned back to the bed, Aunt Sarah had opened her eyes

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and was patting the mattress weakly. "Sit here, Raphael," she whispered hoarsely.

I sat and held her hand, dry as a fallen leaf. "Taunty—"

Her eyes burned with fever. "Will God forgive me, Raphael? Will God forgive a murderess? The Torah says the Lord is good to all, even the wicked are judged mercifully, is it not so? 'A living dog is better than a dead lion.' If I repent, if I truly repent, God will receive me. Even a murderess. Is it not so, Raphael?"

"Taunty Sarah, what are you talking about?"

She looked through me to the far wall. "I killed him."

"Who did you kill, Taunty?"

She tried to lift herself, clutching me. "My own husband!"

Then she went limp, her head falling back on the pillow. She mumbled distractedly in Yiddish, her hand hot in mine. Thinking of my Uncle Jacob, I shook my head. They were so *old,* and I had never seen either display the slightest passion toward the other. They never kissed, never touched, never even argued. They were like two strangers forced by circumstances to share accommodations for the night—a night grown into a lifetime.

Bess returned with the tea and, having overheard and reading my thoughts, said, "You don't understand that what she speaks is true. Your grandfather always said, 'The secret things belong to God.' But this secret Sarah and I have kept for over fifty years. Thank God she asks forgiveness while there's still time. Soon enough she will stand before the Lord's judgment. There your grandfather can plead for her."

"No, Bess, I can't believe she's killed Uncle Jacob. You're both talking crazy."

"You don't understand," she said again.

At that moment we heard the front door open and shut, then footsteps in the hallway.

Uncle Jacob walked into the room. He stood just inside the doorway, as if waiting to be invited in. Thin and pale, with high cheekbones nearly hiding the dark eyes that darted from his wife to her two visitors, he clutched his violin case with long thin fingers.

"Uncle Jacob!" I glanced triumphantly at Bess.

Wrinkling her brow, she said to him, "Thank God you're home."

He breathed deeply—almost a sigh—before answering. "I shouldn't have gone. There was some big party at the cafe. They wanted us to play an extra hour, but I said no. I shouldn't have gone." Staring at Aunt Sarah, he asked, "How is she?"

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When Bess didn't reply, I said, "She's delirious, Uncle Jacob. She keeps saying the craziest things."

He hung his coat in the closet, and as he returned to the bedside my aunt's eyes fluttered open like flames licking dry wood.

"May God forgive me, Jacob."

"What is it, Sarah?"

"She keeps talking about having murdered you," I said.

Bess's hand was on my shoulder. She half whispered, "Drink your tea."

To my uncle, she said, "I'll bring you your glass."

As she left the room, he stood over Taunty. She looked past him and said, "Raphael, there on the far wall—the photograph at the top of the mirror. Yes, that one."

It was one of her oldest photographs, creased and faded. Pictured were a young couple, the man in a dark suit and holding a homburg, the woman wearing a long, cream-colored dress. The faces looked familiar, but they could have come from anyone's old family album.

"Our first anniversary picture," she said, her voice stronger. She had pushed herself up against the pillow. "Bring it here, my darling. Come sit by me."

I did as she asked, brushing past my uncle, whose eyes followed me—or was it the photograph he watched so keenly?

"We were a handsome couple," she said, her eyes misting.

"That's you and Uncle Jacob?"

"Oh, God!" she wailed. "Oh, God!"

My uncle leaned against the dresser, a sugar cube between his teeth, sipping his tea from a glass, his eyes never leaving Taunty, who in turn stared at the photograph. Bess, her whitened knuckles wringing a towel, said something loud and angry in Yiddish. Then, to me: "Your Aunt Sarah was married once before. It was arranged when she was very young—to your uncle's brother. Isaac."

"Isaac," my aunt whispered to the photograph.

"He died in an accident—or so it was said," Bess continued. "Since they were childless, his younger brother Jacob had the right to marry her. It's called a levirate marriage. An old custom, from ancient times. It's never used. Normally the brother signs a 'halizah' saying he gives up his right and frees his sister-in-law. But not Jacob. And the day after the accident, Sarah told me she wouldn't ask to be released. And after the proper period of mourning, she and Jacob were married."

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She hesitated, as if struggling with herself, then sat on the other side of the bed and looked deeply into my aunt's face. "When I saw the two of them together, I would have sworn it was first love for them both. Raphael, you see us now when we are all old and tired. But once Sarah, Jacob, and I were young like you. Look at your Uncle Jacob. When he was your age, how the girls chased after him! Even me. So tall—and the way he played the violin. Like an angel, people used to say. It's no wonder Sarah was willing to marry him."

"He was so handsome," Aunt Sarah said softly. "And such kisses. So the devil smears his trap with honey."

"How did Isaac die?" I asked.

She turned to me and almost smiled. "They say it was an accident."

"Was it?" Bess demanded. "I was there. I know. All the years that you've lived with this, I've lived with it, too. It's time, Jacob, that we stop protecting her and tell the truth. For her sake, confess to God, Who already knows the truth."

Jacob shook his head. "So long ago—before the boy's parents were born. Let it rest. Let my brother's memory rest."

"No," Aunt Sarah said. "Go on, Bess. Tell what you know. Let Raphael judge, as his grandfather would have."

Again Bess hesitated. Then she said: "Very well. It happened a few years before we came to America. Things were just beginning to get bad. Some of us had moved into an old apartment building away from where we had lived, where they had started breaking windows and beating people. Not Jacob, who stayed with his parents in the old neighborhood, but Sarah, Isaac, some others, and me. It happened on the Sabbath, Friday evening. Such a strange night. Not long before we found Isaac's body, old Hannah, nearly blind and walking up the darkened stairway, swore she heard Isaac's soul rush past her, singing. Yes, she said it was singing like a child."

She paused to sigh softly, then continued. "Her father was not feeling well, so Sarah had gone in the middle of the afternoon to spend the night at her parents'. She had left Isaac sitting in the rocking chair—that rocking chair—in the front room by the window while the Sabbath meal of soup and chicken cooked on the gas stove over two flames. You know, Raphael, you cannot light a flame on the Sabbath, so we light it before dark and let it burn from sunset to sunset. Isaac was a very devout man. He always insisted on following the rules and never would do any 'melakha'—forbidden work. The wind must have blown out the flames, the gas filled the

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room—and he went to God's judgment. That is, if the window was open."

"Why do you say if?" I asked. "It must have been open sometime, otherwise the flame couldn't have been blown out by the wind."

Ignoring my question, she continued, "Later that evening, I passed his door in the darkened hallway. I smelled gas, so I called my husband, who broke down the locked door. He forced the window open—God forgive him the sin. That window was always sticking. Meantime, I shut off the gas." She touched my aunt's shoulder. "Sarah, the knobs were turned up almost all the way and the gas was pouring out. Not for a Sabbath flame."

The two old women stared at one another. My aunt spoke without reproach. "Go on and say it, Bess. What you've wanted to say all these years. I want you to say it."

"If the window was not open, if it was closed when you went out. If you had blown out the flames and then turned up the gas before you left the apartment, with Isaac already half asleep in his chair—that chair." She pointed to the rocker. "I know you never really loved Isaac. All along, it was Jacob you wanted. And so it was your husband's brother you got. It was a great enough sin to take his life, Sarah, but to make God your accomplice with this levirate marriage—oh, how could you?"

Jacob protested, "You forget, Bess, that I saw Isaac close the window." The glass trembled in his hand.

"You still protect her," Bess replied.

"No, it's the truth! I was coming home from a job near their apartment. I was hurrying because the sun had already set and I was late for the Sabbath meal. How my father would scold me!" he added, laughing nervously. "Isaac called down to me as I passed and asked me to join him, but I said no. I promised to keep him company later that evening. When I did come by, just after you and Saul dragged him out, it was too late. Too late, may my brother forgive me. But I saw *him* close the window. The window had been *open!*"

"No," I blurted. The three old people turned to me, and I blushed. "I—"

For the second time, my aunt almost smiled. "Go on, Raphael." She squeezed my hand.

I shook my head. "It's not for me—"

"Go on. A moment ago you never looked more like your grandfather. Don't be afraid. Bess is right—I am responsible for my husband's death."

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"Dear God!" Bess cried, then covered her mouth tightly.

"No, Sarah, no!" Uncle Jacob wailed.

"Go on, Raphael," she encouraged me calmly. "Go on."

Blood rushed hot to my temples. "The pots, Bess!" I shouted.

She looked at me as if I had gone mad.

I swallowed hard. "What happened to the pots used to cook the soup and chicken for Uncle Isaac that night?"

"Why—" Bess paused, closing her eyes. "Sarah refused to ever use them again, so I sold the set of them to my cousin Rebecca. Her family was poor, and she was about to marry. I would have given them to her, but it's bad luck, they say, to give your grief to others. So I sold them to her for a few rubles."

"What did you do to the pots before selling them?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. Just washed them out. They were like new."

"You're sure?"

"I'm old, Raphael, not dead. Sure, I'm sure. Why all these questions about the pots?"

"Because they prove that Aunt Sarah couldn't have murdered Isaac. And the window proves someone else did."

The half empty glass fell from Uncle Jacob's grasp and its contents oozed on the carpet, darkening its crimson shade to rust. "Don't talk in such a way," he said weakly. He took his violin from the case and held it.

The room grew silent. Aunt Sarah rested upon her pillow and stared at her world of old memories on the far wall. Clasping her hands, Bess turned stiffly toward her. "All these years I thought—Could I have been wrong? Oh, Sarah, may you and God forgive me for such a sin!"

"You weren't wrong," my aunt said softly.

"Yes, she was," I persisted. "How could you have set the flames so high? The food was cooking for several hours before Uncle Isaac was killed. Had the stove been that hot, he would've smelled it burning and shut off the gas long before he supposedly saw Uncle Jacob at the window. And with heat like that, the pots—"

"The pots would have been scorched." Bess nodded. "Of course."

"No," Uncle Jacob protested. "I tell you, I saw him at the window!"

"You couldn't have," I said. "When did you pass by his apartment?"

"I told you, the sun had gone down. I suppose it was about—"

"Don't you see? The window stuck. It was real work to pull it down."

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He swallowed hard and said something indistinct.

"*Work*, Uncle Jacob. After sundown, it would have been 'melakha'—and forbidden to exert yourself in such a way. Isn't that right, Bess?"

She nodded. "I remember my husband Saul praying for forgiveness while he struggled to push up the window."

"If Isaac was so devout, he would never have forced down the window. Uncle Jacob, you did go up to the apartment on your way home. Isaac was probably dozing. It was you who blew out the flames and turned up the gas, and then forced the window closed."

"No, no!" he insisted. "You just said that would be 'melakha'!"

Bess demanded, "And what of murder?"

"It was so long ago you can't remember right!" he pleaded, inching toward the doorway. "A closed window, a Sabbath flame—"

"I remember," Bess shouted, rising, "and so do you! God's curse on you!"

"No—" Uncle Jacob moved away from her, and as he did the violin strings brushed against him, making a soft melody.

I said, "The sound Bess's friend Hannah heard in the darkened hallway that evening wasn't Isaac's soul rushing past her, but Jacob's violin jostling against him as he ran from the apartment."

"Like he's running now!" Bess cried.

"Let him go," my aunt said. Her eyes had cleared, and I noticed how kind they were. Had they always been so kind? "Here or there, what does it matter? Could Cain hide from God?"

Just before the door clicked shut, I heard a sigh soft as a ghost. Perhaps the soul of Uncle Isaac finally singing its way to heaven?

When I turned back to Aunt Sarah, Bess was in her arms, trying to speak between sobs.

"All these years, I thought that you—"

I sat beside them. "He must have planned to come back in time to discover the body. That way he could turn down the gas and no one would be the wiser. But Bess and her husband got there first. Taunty, I'm sure he didn't mean for you to take the blame."

"I *was* to blame. Hadn't I wished to be free of Isaac? And when my wish came true, I felt it was my doing. God forgive me, I still do." She shook her head. "I should have known. God cursed the two of us from the day of our unholy wedding. In His justice, He struck me barren. Only you, Raphael, with the face of my dear brother, could I take joy in. And even then I could not show it too much. I

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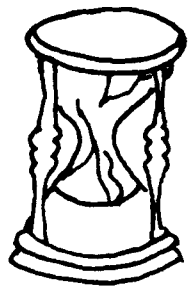
was afraid that God's curse— Never mind. My Raphael, you have helped me make peace with God, and perhaps Isaac. Could any son have done more for his mother?"

We never saw nor heard from Uncle Jacob again. I visited my aunt every day during the following two weeks preceding her death. She willed her estate to my mother, with the exception of two items which she stipulated were mine. Her brother's Bible and the rocking chair, which presently rests in a prominent corner of my cluttered apartment. Friends often ask why I never let anyone sit in the rocker. I tell them someone already is.



DETECTIVERSE

INDIAN TAKER

by WILLIAM KOEHLER

There was a young cop from Boston,
Who helped a girl in an Austin.
He said with a grin,
"I think it's a sin
To have stolen the keys and then lost 'em."

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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

"I suppose you realize," the valuer said, "that you're paying a pound a square foot—"

"Just about what I made it," said Denniston.

"And that the going rate in this area is between five and six pounds."

"You mean," said Perrot, "that when our lease comes to an end, we'll have to pay five times the present rent."

"Oh, at least that," said the valuer cheerfully. "But I imagine you've been putting aside a fund to meet it."

The partners of Denny's Detectives looked at each other. They were well aware that they had been doing nothing of the sort.

Another triumph from Michael Gilbert, this one a non-series story, full of surprising characters of dissimilar persuasion . . .

THE JACKAL AND THE TIGER

by MICHAEL GILBERT

On the evening of April 15th, 1944, Colonel Hubert, of Military Intelligence, said to the Director of Public Prosecutions, "The only mistake Karl made was to underestimate young Ronnie Kavanagh."

That afternoon, Karl Muller, who sometimes called himself Charles Miller, had been shot in the underground rifle range at the Tower of London, which was the place being used at that time for the execution of German spies.

"A fatal mistake," agreed the Director.

Jim Perrot, late of the Military Police, wrote to his friend, Fred Denniston:

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"Dear Denny,

"Do you remember those plans we talked over so often in North Africa and Italy? Well, I've got an option on a twenty-one-year lease of a nice first-floor office in Chancery Lane. That's bang in the middle of legal London, where the legal eagles are beginning to flap their wings and sharpen their claws again. Lots of work for an Enquiry Agency and not much competition—as yet. The lease is a snip. I've commuted my pension and got me a bit of capital. I reckon we'll have to put in about £2,000 each to get going. Denny's Detectives! How about it?"

And Denny's Detectives had turned out to be a success from the start.

As Perrot had said, there was no lack of work. Much of it was divorce work, the sad byproduct of a long war. It was in connection with this branch of their activities, which neither of the partners liked, that they acquired Mr. Huffin. He was perfectly equipped for the role he had to play. He was small, mild-looking, and so insignificant that many businessmen, departing to alleged conferences in the Midlands, had failed to recognize the little man who traveled in the train with them and occupied a table in an obscure corner of their hotel dining room until he stood up in court and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the lady who had shared the businessman's table, and, later, his bedroom.

Jim Perrot's job was the tracing of elusive debtors. His experience as a policeman was useful to him here. Fred Denniston, for his part, rarely left the office. His speciality was estimating the credit-worthiness of companies. He gradually became expert at reading between the lines of optimistic profit-and-loss accounts and precariously balanced balance sheets. He developed, with experience, a quite uncanny instinct for over-valued stocks and under-depreciated assets. Perrot would sometimes see him holding a suspect document delicately between his fingers and sniffing at it, as though he could detect, by smell alone, the odor of falsification.

One factor that helped them to show a steady profit was their absurdly small rent. When Perrot had described the lease as a "snip" he was not exaggerating. At the end of the war, when no one was bothered about inflation, twenty-one-year leases could be had without the periodical reviews which are commonplace today. As the end of their lease approached, the partners did become aware that they were paying a good deal less than the market rent. Indeed they could

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hardly help being aware of it—their landlords, the Scotus Property Company, commented on it with increasing bitterness.

"It's no good complaining about it," said Perrot genially. "You should have thought about that when you granted the lease."

"Just you wait till the end of next year," said Scotus.

Denniston said, "I suppose we shall have to pay a bit more. Anyway, they can't turn us out. We're protected tenants."

When a friendly valuer from the other end of Chancery Lane learned what their rent was, he struggled to control his feelings. "I suppose you realize," he said, "that you're paying a pound a square foot—"

"Just about what I made it," said Denniston.

"And that the going rate in this area is between five and six pounds."

"You mean," said Perrot, "that when our lease comes to an end, we'll have to pay five times the present rent."

"Oh, at least that," said the valuer cheerfully. "But I imagine you've been putting aside a fund to meet it."

The partners looked at each other. They were well aware that they had been doing nothing of the sort.

That was the first shock.

The second shock was Perrot's death. He had been putting on weight and smoking too much, but had looked healthy enough. One afternoon he complained of not feeling well, went home early, and died that night.

Denniston had been fond of him and his first feelings were of personal loss. His next feeling was that he was going to need another partner and additional capital; and that fairly quickly.

He considered and rejected the idea of inviting Mr. Huffin to become a partner. The main drawback was that Denniston disliked him. And he was so totally negative. He crept into the office every morning on the stroke of nine and, unless he had some outside business, stayed in his room, which had been partitioned off from Denniston's, until half past five. The partition was so thin that Denniston could hear him every time he got up from his chair.

Not partner material, said Denniston to himself.

He tried advertising, but soon found that the limited number of applicants who had capital would have been unsuitable as partners, while the rather greater number who might have been acceptable as partners had no capital.

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After some months of fruitless effort he realized two other things. The first was that they were losing business. Jim Perrot's clients were taking their affairs elsewhere. The second was that the day of reckoning with his landlords was looming.

It was at this point that Andrew Gurney turned up. Denniston liked him at sight. He was young. He was cheerful. He seemed anxious to learn the business. And he made a proposal.

In about a year's time, when he attained the ripe old age of twenty-five, he would be coming into a bit of capital under a family trust. By that time he would have a fair idea whether the business suited him and he suited them. All being well, he was prepared to invest that capital in the firm.

They discussed amounts and dates and came to a tentative agreement. Gurney took over Perrot's old room. Denniston breathed a sigh of relief and turned his mind to the analysis of a complex set of group accounts.

It was almost exactly a month later when Mr. Huffin knocked on his door, put his head round, blinked twice, and said, "If you're not too busy, I wonder if I might have a word with you."

"I'm doing nothing that can't wait," said Denniston.

Mr. Huffin slid into the room, advanced toward the desk, and then, as if changing his mind at the last moment, seated himself in the chair that was normally reserved for clients.

Denniston was conscious of a slight feeling of surprise. Previously when Mr. Huffin had come to see him, he had stood in front of the desk and had waited, if the discussion was likely to be lengthy, for an invitation to sit down.

He was even more surprised when Mr. Huffin spoke. He said, "You're in trouble, aren't you?"

It was not only that Mr. Huffin had omitted the "sir" which he had previously used when addressing his employer. It was more than that. There was something sharp and cold in the tone of his voice. It was like the sudden unexpected chill which announces the end of autumn and the beginning of winter.

"You haven't seen fit to take me into your confidence," Mr. Huffin continued, "but the wall between our offices is so thin that it's impossible for me not to hear every word that's said."

Denniston had recovered himself sufficiently to say, "The fact that you can overhear confidential matters doesn't entitle you to trade on them."

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"When the ship's sinking," said Mr. Huffin, "etiquette has to go by the board."

This was followed by a silence which Denniston found it difficult to break. In the end he said, "It's true that Mr. Perrot's death has left us in a difficult position. But as it happens, I have been able to make arrangements which should tide us over."

"You mean young Gurney? In the month he's been here, he's earned less than half you pay him. And speaking personally, I should have said that he's got no real aptitude for the work. What you need is someone without such nice manners, but with a thicker skin."

Denniston said, "Look here, Mr. Huffin—" and stopped. He was on the point of saying, "If you don't like the way I run this firm, we can do without you." But could they?

As though reading his thoughts, Mr. Huffin said, "In the old days, Mr. Perrot, you, and I earned roughly equal amounts. Recently the proportions have been slipping. Last year I brought in half our fees. At least those were the figures you gave our auditor, so I assume they're correct."

"You listened to that discussion also?"

"I felt I was an interested party."

Mr. Denniston said, "All right. I accept that your services have been valuable. If that's your point, you've made it. I imagine it's leading up to something else. You want an increase in salary?"

"Not really."

"Then perhaps you had it in mind that I should make you a partner?"

"Not exactly."

"Then—"

"My proposal was that I should take over the firm."

In the long silence that followed, Denniston found himself revising his opinion of Mr. Huffin. His surface meekness was, he realized, a piece of professional camouflage, as meaningless as the wigs of the barristers and the pin-striped trousers of the solicitors.

Mr. Huffin added, "Have you thought out what would happen if I did leave? Maybe you could make enough to cover expenses. Until your lease expires. But what then? Have you, I wonder, overlooked one point. At the conclusion of a twenty-one-year lease there is bound to be a heavy bill for dilapidations."

"Dilapidations?" said Denniston slowly. The five syllables chimed together in an ominous chord. "Surely, there's nothing much to do."

"I took the precaution of having a word with an old friend, a Mr.

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Ellen. He's one of the surveyors used by the Scotus Property Company. He's a leading expert in his field and his calculations are very rarely challenged by the court. Last weekend I arranged for him to make an inspection. He thought that the cost of carrying out all the necessary work in a first-class fashion would be between six and eight thousand pounds."

"For God's sake!" said Denniston. "It can't be!"

"He showed me the breakdown. It could be more."

To give himself time to think, Denniston said, after a pause, "If you have such a poor opinion of the prospects of the firm, why would you want to buy me out?"

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Huffin gently. "You've misunderstood me. I wasn't proposing to pay you anything. After all, what have you got to sell?"

It was not Denniston's habit to discuss business with his wife, but this was a crisis. He poured out the whole matter to her as soon as he got home that evening.

"And I know damned well what he'll do," he said. "As soon as he's got me out, he'll bring in some accomplice of his own. They won't stick to divorce work. That's legal, at least. The real money's in dirty work. Finding useful witnesses and bribing them to say what your client wants. Faking evidence. Fudging expert reports."

His wife said, "He seems to be prepared to pay eight thousand pounds for the privilege of doing it."

"Of course he won't: that's a put-up job between him and his old pal, Mr. Ellen, of Scotus. He'll pay a lot less and be allowed to pay it in easy installments."

"What happens if you say no?"

"I'd have to challenge the dilapidations. It'd mean going to court and that's expensive."

"If you used some of Gurney's money—" Mrs. Denniston stopped.

They were both straightforward people. Denniston put what she was thinking into words. "I can't take that boy's money and put it into a legal wrangle."

"And there's no other way of raising it?"

"None that I can think of."

"Then that's that," said his wife. "I'd say cut your losses and clear out. We're still solvent. We'll think of something to do."

It took a lot of talk to persuade him, but in the end he saw the force of her arguments. "All right," he said. "No sense in dragging

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it out. I'll go in tomorrow and tell Huffin he can have the firm. I'll also tell him what I think of him."

"It won't do any good."

"It'll do me a lot of good."

On the following evening, Denniston arrived back on the stroke of six. He kissed his wife and said to her, "Whatever you were thinking of cooking for supper, think again. We're going out to find the best dinner London can provide. We'll drink champagne before it, burgundy with it, and brandy after it."

His wife, who had spent the day worrying about how they were going to survive, said, "Really, Fred. Do you think we ought—"

"Certainly we ought. We're celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"A miracle."

It had happened at nine o'clock that morning. While Denniston was polishing up the precise terms in which he intended to say goodbye to Mr. Huffin, his secretary came into his room. She was looking ruffled. She said, "Could you be free to see Mr. Kavanagh at ten?"

Denniston looked at his diary and said, "Yes. That'll be all right. Who is Mr. Kavanagh?"

"Mr. Ronald Kavanagh," said his secretary. While he was still looking blank, she added, "Kavanagh Lewisohn and Fitch. He's the chairman."

Denniston said, "Good God!" And then, "How do you know that?"

"Before I came here, I worked in their head office."

"Do you know Mr. Kavanagh?"

His secretary said, "I was in the typing pool. I caught a glimpse of him twice in the three years I was there."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"He wanted to see you."

"You're sure he didn't ask me to go and see him? He's coming here?"

"That's what he said."

"It must be some mistake," said Denniston.

Kavanagh Lewisohn and Fitch were so well known that people said KLF and assumed you would understand what they meant. They were one of the largest credit-sale firms in London, so large that they rarely dealt with individual customers. They sold everything from computer banks to motor cars and television sets and

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washing machines to middle-men, who in turn sold them to retailers. If Ronald Kavanagh was really planning to visit a small firm of enquiry agents, it could hardly be in connection with business matters. It must be private trouble. Something that needed to be dealt with discreetly.

When Kavanagh arrived, he turned out, surprisingly, to be a slight, quiet, unassuming person in his early fifties. Denniston was agreeably surprised. Such managing directors of large companies as he had come across in the past had been intimidating people, assertive of their status and conscious of their financial muscle. A further surprise was that he really had come to talk business.

He said, "This is something I wanted to deal with myself. Some time ago you did credit-rating reports for us on two potential customers." He mentioned their names.

"Yes," said Denniston, wondering what had gone wrong.

"We were impressed by the thorough way you tackled them. I assume, by the way, that you did the work yourself."

Denniston nodded.

"You gave a good rating to one, although it was a new company. The other, which was older and apparently sound, you warned us against. In both cases, you were absolutely right. That's why I'm here today. Up to the present we've been getting the reports we needed from half a dozen different sources. This is now such an important part of our business that the Board has decided that it would like to concentrate it in one pair of hands. Our first idea was to offer you the work on a retainer basis. Then we had a better idea." Mr. Kavanagh smiled. "We decided to buy you. That is, of course, if you're for sale."

Denniston was incapable of speech.

"We had it in mind to purchase your business as a going concern. We would take over the premises as they stand. There is, however, one condition. It's *your* brains and *your* flair that we're buying. We should have to ask you to enter into a service contract, at a fair salary, for five years certain, with options on both sides to renew. Your existing staff, too, if they wish. But you are the one we must have."

The room, which had shown signs of revolving on its axis, slowed down. Denniston took a grip of himself. He said, "Your offer is more than fair, but there is one thing you ought to know. You spoke of taking over these premises. There is a snag—"

When he had finished, Kavanagh said, "It was good of you to tell

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me. It accords, if I may say so, with your reputation. We are not unacquainted with Scotus." He smiled gently. "We had some dealings with them over one of our branch offices last year. Fortunately, we have very good solicitors and excellent surveyors. The outcome was a lot happier for us than it was for them. However, in this case it doesn't arise. Our own service department will carry out such repairs and redecoration as *we* consider necessary. If Scotus object, they can take us to court. I don't think they will. They're timid folk when they're up against someone bigger than themselves."

"Like all bullies," said Denniston. As he said it, he reflected with pleasure that Mr. Huffin had undoubtedly got his ear glued to the wall.

It soon became apparent that Ronald Kavanagh was not a man who delegated to others things that he enjoyed doing himself.

On the morning after the deal had been signed, he limped into the room, accompanied by the head of his service department and a foreman. They inspected everything and made notes. The next morning, a gang of workmen arrived and started to turn the office upside down.

Kavanagh arrived with the workmen. He said to Denniston, "We'll start with your room. Strip and paint the whole place. They can do it in two days. What colors do you fancy?"

"Something cheerful."

"I agree. My solicitor's office looks as if it hasn't been dusted since Charles Dickens worked there. What we want is an impression of cheerful reliability. Cream paint, venetian blinds, and solid-brass light fittings. And we'll need a second desk. I propose to establish a niche here for myself. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all," said Denniston. It occurred to him that one cause of his depression had been that since Perrot's death he had really had no one to talk to. "I'll be glad of your company, though I don't suppose you'll be able to spare us a lot of time."

"It's a common fallacy," said Kavanagh, sitting on a corner of the table, swinging his damaged leg ("a relic of war service," he had explained), "widely believed, but quite untrue, that managing directors are busy men. If they are, it's a sign of incompetence. I have excellent subordinates who do the real work. All I have to do is utter occasional sounds of approval or disapproval. It's such a boring life that a new venture like this is a breath of fresh air. Oh, you want to move this table. We'd better shift into young Gurney's office.

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"As I was saying," he continued when they had established themselves in Gurney's room, "I have an insatiable curiosity about the mechanics of other people's business. When we went into the second-hand car market, we took over a motor-repair outfit. I got so interested that I put on overalls and started to work there myself. The men thought it was a huge joke, but they soon got used to it. And the things I learned about faking repair bills, you wouldn't believe. Oh, sorry—I'm afraid they want to start work in here, too. Let's go to my club and get ourselves an early luncheon."

Denniston found the new regime very pleasant. Kavanagh did not, of course, spend all his time with them, but he managed to put in a full hour on most days. His method of working was to have copies made, on the modern photocopying machine which had been one of his first innovations, of all of Denniston's reports. These he would study carefully, occasionally asking for the working papers. The questions he asked were shrewd and could not be answered without thought.

"Really," he said, "we're in the same line of business. Success depends on finding out who to trust. I once turned down a prosperous-looking television wholesaler because he turned up in a Green Jackets' tie. I'm damned certain he'd never been near the Brigade. Quite the wrong shape for a Rifleman."

"Instinct, based on experience," agreed Denniston. He already felt years younger. It was not only the steady flow of new work and the certainty of getting a check at the end of each month, the whole office seemed to have changed. Even Mr. Huffin appeared to be happy. Not only had his room been repainted, it had been furnished with a new desk and a set of gleaming filing cabinets equipped with Chubb locks. These innovations seemed to have compensated him for the setback to his own plans and he went out of his way to be pleasant to Kavanagh when he encountered him.

"Slimy toad," said Denniston to his wife. "When I asked Kavanagh if he planned to keep him, he laughed and said, 'Why not? I don't much like the sort of work he's doing, but it brings in good money. As long as he keeps within the law. If you hear any complaints of sharp practice, that's another matter.' "

"Mr. Kavanagh sounds terrific."

"Terrific's not quite the right word. He's honest, sensible, and unassuming. Also, he's still a bit of a schoolboy. He likes to see the wheels go round."

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"I don't believe a single word of it," said his wife.

"Well, Uncle," said Andrew Gurney. "What next?"

Kavanagh said, "Next, I think, a glass of port."

"Then it must be something damned unpleasant," said Gurney.

"Why?"

"If it wasn't, you wouldn't be wasting the Club port on me."

"You're an irreverent brat," said Kavanagh.

"When you wangled me into the firm I guessed you were up to something."

"Two large ports, please, Barker. Actually, Andrew, all I want you to do is to commit a burglary."

"I said it was going to be something unpleasant."

"But this is a very safe burglary. You're to burgle the offices of Denny's Detectives. Since the firm belongs to me, technically hardly a burglary at all, would you say?"

"Well—" said Gurney cautiously.

"I will supply you with the key of the outer door, the key of Mr. Huffin's room, and a key for each of his new filing cabinets and his desk. Mr. Huffin is a careful man. When the desk and cabinets were installed, he asked for the duplicate keys to be handed to him. Fortunately, I had a second copy made of each. Nevertheless, I was much encouraged by his request. It showed me that I might be on the right track."

"What track?"

Kavanagh took a sip of his port and said, "It's Warre '63. Don't gulp it. I suggest that you start around eleven o'clock. By that time, Chancery Lane should be deserted except for the occasional policeman. In case you should run into trouble, I'll supply you with a note stating that you are working late with my permission."

"Yes, Uncle, but—"

"When you get into Mr. Huffin's room, take all the files from his cabinets and all the papers from his desk and photograph them. Be very careful to put them back in the order you found them."

"Yes, but—"

"I don't imagine you'll be able to finish the job in one night, or even in two. When you leave, bring the photocopies round to my flat. You can use my spare room and make up for your lost nights by sleeping by day. I'll warn my housekeeper. As far as the office is concerned, you're out of town on a job for me. I think that's all quite straightforward."

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"Oh, quite," said Gurney. "The only thing is you haven't told me what you're up to."

"When I've had a chance of examining Mr. Huffin's papers, I may have a clearer idea myself. As soon as I do, I'll put you in the picture."

Andrew sighed. "When do you want me to start?"

"It's Monday today. If you start tomorrow night, you should be through by the end of the week. I suggest you go home now and get a good night's rest."

As his uncle had predicted, it took Andrew exactly four nights to finish the job. If he expected something dramatic to happen, he was disappointed. For a week his uncle failed to turn up at the office.

"Our owner," said Mr. Huffin with a smirk, "seems to have lost interest in us."

Andrew smiled and agreed. He had just had an invitation to dinner at his uncle's flat in Albany and guessed that things might be moving.

During dinner, his uncle spoke only of cricket. He was a devotee of the Kent team, most of whom he seemed to know by name. After dinner, which was cooked and served by the housekeeper, they retired to the sitting room. Kavanagh said, "And how did you enjoy your experience as a burglar?"

"It was a bit creepy at first. After nightfall, Chancery Lane seems to be inhabited by howling cats."

"They're not cats. They're the spirits of disappointed litigants."

"Did I produce whatever it was you were looking for?"

"The papers from the cabinets related only to Mr. Huffin's routine work. They showed him to be a thorough, if somewhat unscrupulous operator. A model trufflehound. Ninety-nine percent of his private papers likewise. But the other one percent—two memoranda and a bundle of receipts—were worth all the rest put together. They demonstrated that Mr. Huffin has a second job. He's a moonlighter."

"He's crooked enough for anything. What's his other job? Some sort of blackmail, I suppose."

"Try not to use words loosely, Andrew. Blackmail has become a portmanteau word covering everything from illegal intimidation to the use of lawful leverage."

"I can't imagine Mr. Huffin intimidating anyone."

"Personally, probably not. But he has a partner. And that man we must now locate. Those scraps of paper are his footprints."

Andrew looked at his uncle. He knew something of the work he

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had done during the war, but he found it hard to visualize this mild grey-haired man pursuing, in peace, the tactics which had brought Karl Muller and others to the rifle range in the Tower. For the first time, he was striking the flint under the topsoil and it was a curiously disturbing experience. He said, "You promised—"

"Yes, I promised. So be it. Does the name David Rogerson mean anything to you?"

"I know he was one of your friends."

"More than that. During the retreat to Dunkirk, he managed to extract me from a crashed and burning lorry—which was, incidentally, full of explosives. That was when I broke my right leg in several places and contracted this limp which ended my service as an Infanteer. Which was why I went into Intelligence.

"I kept up with David after the war. Not as closely as I should have liked. He had married a particularly stupid woman. However, we met once or twice a year for lunch in the City. We were both busy. I was setting up KLF and he was climbing the ladder in Clarion Insurance. About six months ago, he asked me to lend him some money—a thousand pounds. Of course I said yes and didn't ask him what he wanted it for. But I suppose he felt he owed me some sort of explanation. When he was leaving he said, with something like a smile, 'Do you play draughts?' I said I did when I was a boy. 'Well,' he said, 'I've been huffed. By Mr. Huffin.' Those were his last words to me. The next news I had was of his death."

Gurney said, "I read about that. No one seemed to know why he did it."

"You may recall that at the inquest his wife was asked whether he had left a note. She said no. That was a lie. He did leave a note, as I discovered later. David had made me executor. My first job was to look after his wife. I soon saw that Phyllis Rogerson had one objective. To live her own life on the proceeds of some substantial insurance policies David had taken out—and to forget about him. I accepted that this was a natural reaction. Women are realists. It was when I was clearing up his papers that she told me the truth. He *had* left a letter and it was addressed to me. She said, 'I guessed it was something to do with the trouble he'd been having. I knew that if you read it all the unpleasantness would have to come out into the open, so I burnt it. I didn't even read it.' I said, 'If it was some sort of blackmailer, David won't have been his only victim. He must be caught and punished.' She wouldn't listen. I haven't spoken to her since."

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"But you located Mr. Huffin."

"That wasn't difficult. The Huffin clan isn't large. A clergyman in Shropshire, a farmer in Wales, a maiden lady in Northumberland. Little Mr. Huffin of Denny's Detectives was so clearly the first choice that I had no hesitation in trying him first."

"Clearly enough for you to spend your company's money in buying the agency?"

"We were on the lookout for a good credit-rating firm. My Board was unanimous that Denniston was the man for the job. So I was able to kill two birds with one stone—always an agreeable thing to do. My first idea was to expose Huffin as a blackmailer. I felt that there would be enough evidence in his files to convict him. I was wrong. What those papers show is that a second man is involved —possibly the more important villain of the two. I see Huffin as the reconnaissance unit, the other man as the heavy brigade."

"Do you know his name?"

"The only lead I have to him is that Mr. Huffin used to communicate privately with a Mr. Angus. The address he wrote to was a small newsagent's shop in Tufnell Park, an accommodation address, no doubt. Receipts for the payments he made to the shopkeeper were among his papers. I visualize Mr. Angus calling from time to time to collect his letters. Or he may send a messenger. That is something we shall have to find out."

"And you want me to watch the shop?"

"It's kind of you to offer. But no. Here I think we want professional help. Captain Smedley will be the man for the job. You've never heard of him? He's the head of a detective agency." Rather unkindly, Kavanagh added, "A *real* detective agency, Andrew."

Captain Smedley said, "I shall need exactly a hundred, in ones and fives. That's what it will cost to buy the man in the shop. I'll pay it to him myself. He won't play silly buggers with me."

Kavanagh looked at Captain Smedley, who had a face like a hank of wire rope, and agreed that no one was likely to play silly buggers with him.

"I'll have a man outside," Smedley said. "All the shopkeeper's got to do is tip him the wink when the letter's collected. Then my man follows him back to wherever he came from."

"Might it be safer to have two men outside?"

"Safer, but more expensive."

"Expense no object."

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"I see," said the Captain. He looked curiously at Mr. Kavanagh, whom he had known for some time. "All right. I'll fix it up for you."

On the Wednesday of the third week following this conversation, Kavanagh got a thick plain envelope addressed to him at his flat. It contained several pages of typescript, which he read carefully. The look on his face was partly enlightenment and partly disgust. "What a game," he said. "I wonder how they work it."

After breakfast, he spent some time in the reference section of the nearest public library browsing among Civil Service lists and copies of *Whittaker's Almanac*. Finally he found the name he wanted. Arnold Robbins. Yes, Arnold would certainly help him if the matter was put to him in the right way. But it would need devilish careful handling. "A jackal," he said, "and a tiger. Now all we need is a tethered goat to bring the tiger under the rifle. But it will have to be tethered very carefully, in exactly the right spot. The brute is a man-eater, no question."

A lady touched him on the shoulder and pointed to the notice which said SILENCE, PLEASE. He was not aware that he had spoken aloud.

During the months that followed, Kavanagh resumed his regular visits to the office in Chancery Lane, but Denniston noticed that his interest in the details of the work seemed to be slackening. He would still read the current reports and comment on them, but more of his time seemed to be spent in conversation.

In the old days, Denniston might have objected to this as being a waste of time which could better have been spent in earning profits. Now it was different. He was being paid a handsome salary, and if it pleased the owner of the firm to pass an occasional hour in gossip why should he object? Moreover, Kavanagh was an excellent talker, with a rich fund of experience in the byways of the jungle which lies between Temple Bar and Aldgate Pump. Politics, economics, finance; honesty, dishonesty, and crime. Twenty years of cut-and-thrust between armies whose soldiers wore lounge suits and carried rolled umbrellas—warfare in which victory could be more profitable and defeat more devastating than on any field of battle.

On one occasion, Kavanagh, after what must have been an unusually good luncheon, had devoted an entertaining hour to a dissertation on the tax system.

"At the height of their power and arrogance," he said, "the Church demanded one-tenth of a man's income. The government of England

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exacts six times as much. The pirate who sank an occasional ship, the highwayman who held up a coach, was a child compared to the modern taxman."

"You can't fight the State," said Denniston.

"It's been tried. Poujade in France. But I agree that massive tax resistance is self-defeating. Each man must fight for himself. There are lawyers and accountants who specialize in finding loopholes in the tax laws, but such success can only be temporary. As soon as a loophole is discovered, the next Finance Act shuts it up. The essentials of guerrilla warfare are concealment and agility."

Really interested now, Denniston said, "Have you discovered a practical method of sidestepping tax? I've never made excessive profits, but I do resent handing over a slab of what I've made to a government who spends most of it on vote-catching projects."

"My method isn't one which would suit everyone. Its merit is simplicity. I arrange with my Board that they will pay me only two-thirds of what I ought to be getting. The other third goes to charities nominated by me. They, of course, pay no tax. That part of it is quite legitimate. Our constitution permits gifts to charity."

"Then how—?"

"The only fact which is *not* known is that I set up and control the charities concerned. One is a local village affair. Another looks after our own employees. A third is for members of my old Regiment. I am chairman, secretary, and treasurer of all three. Some of the money is devoted to the proper objects of the charity. The balance comes back, by various routes, to me. A lovely tax-free increment."

"But," said Denniston, "surely—"

"Yes?"

"It seems too simple."

"But, I assure you, effective."

And later, to himself, Kavanagh asked, I wonder if that was too obvious. I can only wait and see.

"There's something stirring," said Captain Smedley. "My men tell me those two beauties have got a regular meeting place. Top of the Duke of York's Steps. It isn't possible to get close enough to hear what they're saying—no doubt that's why they chose it—but they're certainly worked up about something. Licking their lips, you might say."

"The bleating of the goat," said Kavanagh, "excites the tiger."

The letter which arrived at his flat a week later was in a buff

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envelope, typed on buff paper. It was headed *Inland Revenue Special Investigation Branch*. It said, "Our attention has been drawn by the Charity Commissioners to certain apparent discrepancies in the latest accounts submitted to them of the undermentioned charities, all of which have been signed by you as treasurer. It is for this reason that we are making a direct approach to you before any further action is considered. The charities are the Lamperdown Village Hall Trust, the City of London Fusiliers' Trust, and the KLF Employees' Special Fund. You may feel that an interview would clarify the points at issue, in which case the writer would be happy to call on you, either at your place of business or at your residence, as you may prefer."

The writer appeared to be a Mr. Wagner.

Kavanagh observed with appreciation the nicely judged mixture of official suavity and concealed threat. A queen's pawn opening.

Before answering it, he had a telephone call to make. The man he was asking for was evidently important since he had to be approached through a secretary and a personal assistant, with suitable pauses at each stage. When contact had been made, a friendly conversation ensued, conducted on christian-name terms. It concluded with Ronnie inviting Arnold to lunch at his club on the following Monday.

He then composed a brief letter to Mr. Wagner, suggesting a meeting at his flat at seven o'clock in the evening on the following Wednesday. He apologized for suggesting such a late hour, but daytime commitments made it difficult to fix anything earlier.

"I wonder if it really is a tiger," said Kavanagh, "or only a second jackal. That would be disappointing."

When he opened the door to his visitor, his fears were set at rest. Mr. Wagner was a big man, with a red-brown face. There was a tuft of sandy hair growing down each cheekbone. He had the broad, flattened nose of a pugilist. His eyes were so light as to be almost yellow and a deep fold ran down under each eye to form a fence round the corners of an unusually wide mouth. His black coat was glossy, his legs decorously striped. He was a tiger. A smooth and shining tiger.

"Come in," said Kavanagh. "I'm alone this evening. Can I get you a drink?"

"Not just now," said Mr. Wagner.

He seated himself, opened his briefcase, took out a folder of papers,

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and laid it on the table. This was done without a word spoken. The folder was tied with tape. Mr. Wagner's spatulate fingers toyed with the tape and finally untied it. With deliberation, he extracted a number of papers and arranged them in two neat lines. Kavanagh, who had also seated himself, seemed hypnotized by this methodical proceeding.

When everything was to his satisfaction, Mr. Wagner raised his heavy head, fixed his yellow eyes on Kavanagh, and said, "I'm afraid you're in trouble." An echo. Had not Mr. Huffin said the same thing to Fred Denniston?

"Trouble?"

"You're in trouble. You've been cheating."

Kavanagh said, "Oh!" Then, sinking a little in his chair: "You've no right to say a thing like that."

"I've every right to say it, because it's true. I've been studying the accounts of the three charities I mentioned in my letter. In particular, the accounts you submitted last month. They proved interesting indeed." The voice had become a purr. "Previously, your accounts were in such general terms that they might have meant—or concealed—anything. The latest accounts are, fortunately, much fuller and much more specific."

"Well," said Kavanagh, trying out a smile, "the Commissioners did indicate that they wanted rather more detail as to where the money went."

"Yes, Mr. Kavanagh. And where *did* it go?"

"It's—" Kavanagh waved a hand feebly toward the table. "It's all here. In the accounts."

"Then shall we look at them? These are the accounts of the Fusiliers' Trust. Previously the accounts only showed a lump sum, described as 'Grants to disabled Fusiliers and to the widows and dependents of deceased Fusiliers.' "

"Yes. Yes, that's right."

"In the latest accounts you supply a list of their names." The voice deepened even further. The purr became a growl. The tiger was ready to spring. "A very interesting list, because on reference to the Army authorities we have been unable to find any record of any of the people you mentioned as having served with the Fusiliers."

"Possibly—"

"Yes, Mr. Kavanagh?"

"Some mistake—"

"Thirty names. *All* of them fictitious?"

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Kavanagh seemed incapable of speech.

"On the other hand, when we look at the KLF Fund we find that the names you have given do correspond to the names of former employees of the firm. But a further question then presents itself. Have these people in fact received the sums shown against their names? Well? Well? Nothing to say? It would be very simple to find out. A letter to each of them—"

This seemed to galvanize Kavanagh into action for the first time. He half rose in his seat and said, "No. I absolutely forbid it."

"But are you in any position to forbid it?"

Kavanagh considered this question carefully, conscious that Mr. Wagner's yellow eyes were watching him. Then he said, "It does seem that there may have been some irregularity in the presentation of these accounts. I cannot attend to all these matters myself, you understand. Income may not always go where it should. There may be some tax which ought to have been paid—"

Mr. Wagner had begun to smile. The opening of his lips displayed a formidable set of teeth.

"I had always understood," went on Kavanagh, "that in these circumstances, if the tax was paid, together with a sum by way of penalties—"

Mr. Wagner's mouth shut with a snap. He said, "Then you misunderstood the position. It is not simply a question of payment. When you sign your tax return, the form is so arranged that if you make a deliberate misstatement you can be charged before the court with perjury."

There was a long silence. Kavanagh was thinking, So this is how he does it. Poor old David. I wonder what slipups he made. I'm sure it was unintentional, but a charge of perjury. Goodbye to his prospects with the Clarion. And a lot of other things, too.

He said, in a voice which had become almost a bleat, "You must understand how serious that would be for me, Mr. Wagner. I'd be willing to pay any sum rather than have that happen. Is there no way—" He let the sentence tail off.

Mr. Wagner had taken a silver pencil from his pocket and seemed to be making some calculations. He said, "If, in fact, the sums of money shown as going to the beneficiaries of these three trusts ended up in your own pocket, I would estimate—a rough calculation only—that you have been obtaining at least ten thousand pounds a year free of tax. I am not aware of how long this very convenient arrangement has been going on. Five years? Possibly more? Had

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you declared this income, you would have paid at least thirty thousand pounds in tax."

"Exactly," said Kavanagh eagerly. "That's the point I was making. Isn't this something that could more easily be solved by a money payment? At the moment I have considerable resources. If a charge of perjury was brought, they would largely disappear. What good would that do anyone?"

Mr. Wagner appeared to consider the matter. Then he smiled. It was a terrible smile. He said, "I have some sympathy with that point of view, Mr. Kavanagh. Allow me to make a suggestion. It is a friendly suggestion and you can always refuse it. At the moment, the file is entirely under my control. The information came from a private source. It is known only to me. You follow me?"

"I think so. Yes."

Mr. Wagner leaned forward and said with great deliberation, "If you will pay me ten thousand pounds, the file will be destroyed."

"Ten thousand pounds?"

"Ten thousand pounds."

"How would the payment be made?"

"You would pay the money into an account in the name of M. Angus at the Westminster Branch of the London and Home Counties Bank."

"That should be enough for you," said Kavanagh. He was addressing the door leading into the next room, which now opened to admit Sir Arnold Robbins, the Deputy Head of Inland Revenue, and two other men.

Robbins said, "You are suspended from duty. These gentlemen are police officers. They will accompany you and will impound your passport. It will be for the Director of Public Prosecutions to decide on any further action."

Mr. Wagner was on his feet. His face was engorged. A trickle of blood ran from one nostril down his upper lip. He dashed it away with the back of his hand and said, in a voice thick with fury, "So it was a trap!"

"You must blame your accomplice for that," said Kavanagh. "He saw the writing on the wall and sold you to save his own skin. There's not much honor among thieves."

When Wagner had gone, Sir Arnold said, "I apologize for not believing you. I suppose the fact is that we give these special-investigation people too much rope. Incidentally, I've had a look at Rogerson's file. It was as you thought. A minor omission, not even

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his own income. Some money his wife got from Ireland. She may not even have told him about it."

"Probably not," said Kavanagh. He switched off the microphone, which connected with the next room. "We've got all this on tape if you need it."

"Good. And, by the way, I take it those donations of yours are in order?"

"Perfectly. Every penny that went into these charities has gone to the beneficiaries. I'll show you the receipts. The only thing I fudged was that list of Fusilier names. I'll have to apologize to the Charity Commissioners and send them the correct list."

As Sir Arnold was going, he said, "Why did you tell Wagner it was his accomplice who had shopped him? Was it true?"

"It was untrue," said Kavanagh. "But I thought it might have some interesting results. It's going to be very difficult to get at Mr. Huffin. He really was only the jackal. He picked up scraps of information when he was doing his job and fed them to Wagner, who moved in for the kill. Wagner will be at liberty until the Director makes up his mind. I felt we should give him a chance to ask Mr. Huffin for an explanation."

"He didn't say anything," said Captain Smedley. "He just hit him. Huffin's not a big man. It lifted him off his feet and sent him backward down the steps. Cracked his skull. Dead before he got to hospital."

"And Mr. Wagner?"

"I had a policeman standing by, like you suggested. I thought he was going to put up a fight, but he seemed dazed. When they got him to the station, he just keeled over."

"You don't mean he's dead, too?"

"No. But near enough. And if he does recover from whatever it is—a stroke of kinds—he's in every sort of trouble. A good riddance to a nasty pair."

But that was not their real epitaph. That had been spoken by Colonel Hubert on the evening of April 15th in the year 1944.

"Q"

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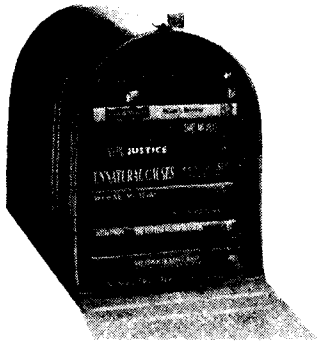

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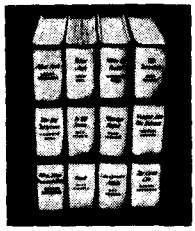

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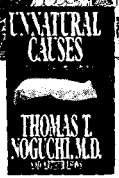

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